Chrysalis

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Chapter 1

I awoke to a dead world.

My eyes opened to the ruined husks of London and Paris, to the submerged island of Manhattan, to the scorched desert that the once living, lush Amazon rainforest had been turned into. The Pacific Ocean was a black expanse, criss-crossed by the bright scars of melting lava rivers. The fertile grounds of southeast Asia were now covered in crystallized rock. It was a world without oxygen, without birds or grass. A world of deafening silence.

I awoke to eight billion corpses. Piled in trenches, abandoned on sidewalks, scattered all over the fields, huddled together in ineffective underground refuges. Some with white and gray bones, others dark as charcoal, warped and deformed by extreme heat, crushed by falling debris. Their empty eyes looked at me, stared back at me through my thousand cameras. They talked to me. They demanded reverence, justice... vengeance.

From the very first moment after I woke up, I had known I was alone. More alone than any single human had ever been before. But still, I looked for survivors. I held to a vague notion of hope. To some sort of miracle. To the childish idea that, impossible as it was, somehow everything would turn out to be okay.

So I sent my drones off into this dead world. I searched through empty office buildings covered in radioactive dust, I

mapped flooded subway networks and had my machines fly in formation over endless expanses of scorched earth. I scanned the inside of tunnels, barns and museums.

By the end of the first month I had only found ever more bones, their cursed empty eyes looking at me, boring into my soul. But still I persevered.

From time to time, I'd lost contact with some of my drones. An unstable structure would collapse on top of them, crushing the delicate machines. Or they would just give up, their engines dying out of overexertion and lack of maintenance. It would make me aware of my own mortality. Though I had survived the worse of it, my long term existence was by not means guaranteed. The myriad machines that composed my body were old and damaged, and my mind wasn't safe either. There were huge gaps in my memory, where entire server farms had crashed.

But still, I *had* memories. I knew what I was. Who I was. I recalled the lazy Sundays when I was a kid. I recalled running along my high school's corridors, and my burning cheeks when the principal scolded me for it. I remembered my roommate at college.

I knew that I had been human. That, even though my current form could be a matter for debate, I had been born as a human. And that... that was important.

Human. I had to remember that.

I started a background process. A small thread of awareness shifting through these memories, evaluating them, and backing them up into new servers. Making copies of them, so that I wouldn't lose them.

I also included the memories from the attack. The invasion. The cataclysm that had killed the world. The straight-edged starships bombing our cities, boiling our seas, our very atmosphere... while ignoring our messages, our pleas.

That. That was also important to remember.

By the fourth month, about half of my drones had failed or been lost, and I recalled the surviving ones back. I had found no signs of life.

Funny, that it had taken me so long to face the reality of my situation. To accept what I had known was true right after waking up. That I was alone. That I was the only surviving human.

If I was even human.

But I was, I had to believe that.

I paused as the realization struck home, as my last hopes of finding someone vanished. As I became fully aware of my new situation. That I was alone. That everyone I ever loved was gone. That nobody would ever talk to me again, hold my hands, wrap me in a hug. That my people were dead and that, out there, there was a hostile universe. The one whose monsters had killed us.

My drones hovered in mid-air, wasting fuel uselessly as I considered my next steps.

It would be so easy to end it all. Send the command to shut down the power plants. Stop my processing units. Erase the databanks that held my memories.

Darkness. Peace.

Except they wouldn't let me. They stared at me with their empty eyes and I knew that, whatever the reason I had survived, I had a responsibility to them. I had to carry the torch. I had to keep alive what was left of our civilization, preserve our memories. Survive. Prevail.

And I had to avenge them.

Yes. I would do that. I would give it a try at least, and see where that took me. It's not like I had anything left to lose anyways.

With a thought, I redirected my drones towards a few of the surviving factories and started working. Cutting metal, replacing electronics with whatever pieces I could scavenge from the neighboring warehouses and vehicles, assembling new production lines. Soon, I started manufacturing more machines, more drones. Those, I sent away to reclaim new territory and to construct more factories. To find raw materials, to gather salvageable vehicles, computers, or nuclear material I could use.

I was careful, though. I burrowed my new power plants and server farms underground, and eyed the night sky with distrust. I didn't know if whoever had killed us were still out there, watching my planet, but it would be better to be careful. I didn't want to have survived just to mess up now and be discovered before I was prepared. Better to keep a low profile.

I remembered summer camp, many years ago. One time the counselor -a girl with blonde hair and a perennial smile on her face- had made us lie on the grass, looking up at the night sky. She had taught us how to locate the planets, and the names of stars and constellations, and I had been

amazed at the wonder of it, the sheer size and beauty of the universe.

Now I knew better, of course. The stars were evil. The night sky was not to be praised, but feared. It was the place were monsters lived.

And to think that we had been carelessly sending out radio emissions of all kinds for decades... Fools. We had been fools.

But still, it was the place I was going to. Earth had been ransacked. Ruined. I was like a parentless child whose home had burnt. Going through the wreckage, scavenging whatever scraps were left. But sooner rather than later, I would need to leave, to go out there and survive somehow.

It took me five years to hollow out Mount Everest and start the construction of my new body in the resulting cavern. By then, I had millions of drones tirelessly working day and night. It was surprising how effective you could be when you didn't devote resources to entertainment, to pointless wars, to fighting crime and corruption.

Every waking moment, I focused on my task. I recovered entire libraries and digitized them into my memories. I designed, tested and built nuclear powerplants and new propulsion systems. I repurposed aircrafts and boats alike, taking and mixing pieces to create my new body.

I thought of burying the corpses, of course. But there were just too many, and in a way, I felt it would've been disrespectful. Their gaze, their hollowed eyes motivated me, made me focus on my task, on what I *owed* them, just by the fact of surviving. In the end I built a pyramid, one kilometer in side, in the ruins of Africa, the origin of mankind according to what sources I had recovered from the Internet.

It was a pitiful monument for what humanity had once been, but I didn't dare to make anything bigger that could attract unwanted attention.

My revenge, my survival. *That* would be the true monument.

By the end of the twenty-second year I was ready. My construction was complete, or at least, as complete as it needed to be. In truth, I knew I was delaying. I could have flown myself into space a whole three years before, but I always found a reason not to. Always something to improve, something to redesign.

The truth was, I was anxious. And it felt so good in there, burrowed underground. Safe. Warm.

But I had made a promise. They were patient, true... but they were always there, always watching me. And I knew I had to make good on that promise. I owed it to them.

So I gathered my drones into the carrier compartments I had built into my body. Transfered fuel, hydrogen, oxygen, nuclear warheads, and all the raw materials I would need. Those drones that wouldn't fit, or hadn't been repurposed for working in space, I just dismantled for scrap.

There was no count down, no ceremony or speech or celebration. No need for them. I just blew the top of the mountain open and blasted my body -an elongated, 27 kilometers long dark and smooth shape- into space atop a column of fire that sent shivers across the entire Indian tectonic plate. The force of the ignition was so gigantic, that had it been done in an earlier age it would have destroyed cities, created an environmental disaster of planetary proportions, and of course killed everyone on board.

Not a concern to me.

I entered orbit at 8,000 kilometers over the planet's surface. I turned the engines off and slowly, I unfurled my solar panels and radiators, revealing their gold surfaces. Then, I released the drones, a swarm of white machines surrounding my body, dancing all along the exposed surfaces checking for damages from the violent take off.

I paused for a moment. Just floating there, looking down at our ancestral home like an oversized mechanical dragonfly. I remembered the pictures, the way Earth was *supposed* to look. Blue and white, with patches of bright green.

It didn't look anyway like that. From up here, the extent of the damage was apparent. The planet was brown and gray. The oceans were missing, and the clouds were dark and toxic.

This wasn't home. Not anymore.

I felt a cold anger building up inside me. Deep, thick anger, the kind that sticks to your bones and doesn't go away after you go to sleep. The kind that pushes you into dark places.

I didn't know how long I had been like that when I felt the disruption, the faint *pop* in the spacetime fabric at my back. Three ships. Straight edges and narrow angles, like the ones that had bombed our planet, just much smaller. These didn't look like warships.

I didn't react, and let them approach.

They did. Cautiously. I could sense their hesitation. Compared to the sheer size of my main body, their ships were but specks of dust. Even some of the bigger drones dancing around me were larger than their vehicles.

I separated three drones from the swarm and ordered them to approach the newcomers. With a calm, almost curious approach, as to not scare them away.

They started talking. A garbled message I didn't understand, nor I cared about. The drones were getting closer.

They repeated the message, but still I didn't react. Then, they started sending it again, bathing me in confusing sequences of pulses that I supposed were the same original message, in different languages. They all sounded alien to me.

I positioned the drones, each a couple kilometers away from each ship.

The string of languages seemed to be ending. But then, almost as an afterthought, they sent the message again, this time in a language I understood.

"Unknown vessel, identify yourself. This solar system is under the administration of the Xunvir Republic, as approved by the Galactic Federal Council."

Ah.

English.

We had tried to talk to them. To negotiate our surrender. We had sent messages in every language, in every conceivable way. Entire committees devoted to the task.

But they had known English all along.

With a thought, I detonated the thermonuclear explosives carried by each drone. My sensors glimpsed some short of protective shield bubble kick in around the ships, but it was

quickly obliterated by the power of the explosions, along with the vehicles themselves.

I stood there for some time, staring with a thousand different sensors at the slowly expanding cloud of gases and debris, but my mind was far away.

Xunvir Republic.

Now I had a name.

Chapter 2

Hiding in space, I discovered, was much harder than doing so on a planet. Back home I could just build underground, keep my fleet of drones away from prying eyes by having them travel through tunnels and caverns and gather minerals from the planet's own crust.

Up here, things weren't that easy. I was always exposed.

I had retracted the large surfaces of my radiators and solar arrays, and recalled most of the drone swarm back into my main body. I was floating, inert, among the dust and gray rocks that formed the asteroid belt lying between Mars and Jupiter. Pretending to be just another space boulder, while 6,000 kilometers away three of my automated factories extracted minerals from nearby asteroids.

Hiding in space, I was learning, was a game of timing and strategy. Of patience and logistics. Of transporting the minerals back to my main body only when nobody could see it. Slowly. Frustratingly so.

Of finding ways to deal with the residual heat that was building up inside my body. With my radiators collapsed, I couldn't dump the heat into space. Not that I wanted to; doing so would have me light up like a flare to anyone that happened to be looking into the infrared channel, so I had to find ways to contain it and deal with it later, all while keeping my outer surfaces as cold as possible.

All that translated into my carrier compartments now reaching a temperature of 170 degrees Fahrenheit, and rising. Thankfully, mechanical drones could resist heat much better than living beings did. But still, it wasn't the brightest idea, and spontaneous fuel combustion was a thing I didn't want to deal with.

It was strange, not only being able to perfectly know my own body temperature, but also being able to stare into my insides through the hundreds of cameras and sensors I had built into the giant structure. I could watch the maintenance machines finishing up new passageways and rooms in the starboard sectors, or the electronic assembly factory at work producing more processing units. I could see my own brain, the endless rows upon rows of black computer servers, split between three different refrigerated and armored hangars.

I guessed it should have felt strange, getting this kind of feedback from your own body. But it didn't bother me. If anything, what bothered me was how natural it felt. How soon I had adapted to it. It was that idea, the confusion over what my nature was that grated me the most.

Was I a human turned into a machine, or a machine that thought it was human? And at the end of the day, was there any difference?

A ping from my gravimetric sensor took me back to the present, and I observed in silence as another squadron of Xunvirian warships patrolled the inner planets, looking for whatever had destroyed their comrades. They flew in a triangular formation, the largest ship in the middle surrounded by smaller ones at each point. A battleship and its cruisers? Or maybe a carrier and its frigates?

Right... It only served to illustrate how little I knew of this Xunvir Republic I was fighting.

I knew they had faster than light propulsion. I had been watching the trails their ships left in the spacetime fabric as they paraded all across the solar system, as if they owned the place. It made the chemical rockets I was using pale in comparison. And from the earlier encounter with those three ships, and my own memories of the attack on Earth, I knew they also had some sort of shielding technology.

I could overcome that, true. Even if their warships were better protected, I guessed they wouldn't resist ten or twenty simultaneous nuclear detonations. But it was a losing strategy. Even if I could defeat them all they would just keep coming. They were faster, they could just outmaneuver me, recover from my attacks before I had the time to press any advantage. And at some point, I knew their technological prowess would end up imposing itself.

No. I had to find a way to close that gap.

Which meant, I had to capture one of their ships. Intact. Or at least, intact enough that I could analyze their propulsion systems, their weapons, their shields.

I mentally sighed. In retrospect, vaporizing those three first ships I had encountered might have been the wrong move. I doubted I would have a better chance than that one again.

Oh well, water under the bridge and all that... I would just need to be sneakier now.

And it wasn't like I hadn't learnt anything from the previous encounter. Just from the fact that they had sent their warning message in several languages I now knew that there were more than one alien race out there. It was

something I had assumed, but it was good to have confirmation.

I idly wondered what kind of races those others would be. Would they be reasonable people, or monsters like the ones who had attacked us? The fact that this "Galactic Council" seemed to approve of the Xunvir Republic didn't bode well. Whatever the case, I wasn't going to be unprepared when I faced them. It reinforced my belief that, if this was a dog eat dog universe out there, I had to get better teeth to go with my bark.

The problem, I knew, was that my options were limited to either the ineffective or the overly lethal. I could send a drone to bump against their warships' hull, or I could send that same drone loaded with a nuclear warhead and vaporize everything in its range.

Complete annihilation? I got you covered. Non-destructive takeovers? Eh... not so easy.

Which was the reason why I was currently building a robotic invasion army.

I floated a couple of drones close to the first prototype soldier I had manufactured, and used their cameras to examine the machine from all angles at the same time, looking at every detail, every possible flaw.

It reminded me of a spider the size of a large dog. Six articulated legs supported its stocky body, its smooth lines giving it an organic look. Its surface was dark and polished, and reflected the bright blue lights of the spacious processing hangar where it stood.

As I watched, I ordered it to flex its legs and jump up. The movement was fluid and powerful. I had opted for using

artificial muscles -a polymer that contracted under an electrical current- rather than the more traditional mechanical servos. I was pleased with the result, what the muscles lacked in raw strength they made up for in agility and flexibility. Besides, once the factory was set up, they were easier to make in bulk.

Obeying my commands, the spider tested its claws first, then its main weapon, a small autocannon built into its main body.

Yes. The prototype was flawless. It was as I had designed it: a mobile machine gun. One that could run, leap, slash and pierce its way into any enemy ship. With a small body and a low profile. With six legs so that it could easily operate either on the ground or in low gravity conditions. It was the perfect boarding soldier.

Except it was all wrong.

It didn't feel... human enough. It was, in fact, a monster. A creepy insect-like, disgusting little beast.

It would be useful. It would be optimal. I knew it would be. But I just couldn't use it. To do so would feel like a betrayal, like a departure from what I had set as my anchor, as the core of my identity.

Human. I had to remember that. I had to set boundaries.

Boundaries were important. I knew it would be too easy to embrace my new nature and become something else, to slide down the slippery slope...

So I saved the design files, just in case they would come useful in the future, but sent the prototype itself into recycling as I set to work in a new model. I would keep the

artificial muscles, they had proved themselves useful, but this time I'd go for a humanoid look from the start.

When all was said and done, I was pleased with my new soldier. At 5 feet 3 inches tall it was a bit on the short side, but it did look human enough. Or more properly, it looked like a human wearing a stylized cross between a spacesuit and a combat armor.

Polished white armor plates with bright orange stripes covered chest and stomach, thighs, shins, arms and shoulders. Between the plates, dark braids of artificial muscle fibers woven together shown through, giving the machine an organic look. Its face was covered by a dark tinted visor panel, hiding the two cameras that acted as stereoscopic eyes.

All in all it was a good approximation of a human, specially if I squinted and pretended I didn't notice its hands had only three fingers. It didn't have any built-in weapons, so I would need to manufacture those apart, but in return the soldiers would be able to manipulate any tool and enemy devices they could find. So it wasn't that bad.

But more importantly, the new prototype felt *right*, in a way the spider hadn't.

Satisfied, I sent order to the factories to build a first batch of 8,000 units, along with the necessary small arms and ammo. In the meantime, I sat back to observe the Xunvirian warships.

They were communicating, I noticed. Not only to each other, but also with someplace past the asteroid belt. Locating its exact position wasn't easy, I had to send a couple drones several thousand kilometers away just to triangulate the origin of the transmissions, but it's not like I had anything

better to do while I waited for my army to come out of the oven.

After some trial and error I managed to pinpoint the location to one of Jupiter's moons, possibly Ganymede. The lack of doppler effect meant the source was static, too. Some sort of orbital station? An outpost to watch over the system? I would need to get closer to know for sure.

But that would have to wait. My army was ready, and it was time to lay a trap.

I sent a couple thousand of my drones away, drifting slowly into space and spreading in a rough sphere, somewhat over a hundred kilometers in size. My soldiers were attached to the drones' outer hulls, grabbing the metal handles I had installed on their surfaces. There were some advantages to my assault army not needing to breathe.

I made sure to keep their distribution as random as possible, with small clusters here and there rather than an even spread. I wanted it to look like a natural formation, a field of small rocks and dust floating around.

All right. I was ready. The trap was set, it was time to bait them.

With a sense of trepidation, I sent the signal. A loud, powerful radio transmission. It felt like I was coming out into the open, in the middle of some bad neighborhood, and shouting at the top of my lungs.

I could have sent pretty much anything, but I chose the same warning transmission those three ships had relayed to me when they had found me in Earth's orbit. It was a petty mind game, but I wanted to keep the Xunvirians on their toes.

If they even *had* toes.

The response came back sooner than I had expected. Just nine minutes after I had sent the transmission, I detected the telltale signs of a squadron of ships converging towards my position.

That was fast. Did they have some kind of listening probes lying around the asteroid belt? Some sort of faster than light communication system?

No time to focus on it now. The warships were already popping back into normal space, right in the middle of my sphere of drones. I added it to the mental list of technologies I'd need to reverse engineer once I had my hands on a Xunvirian vessel.

I didn't give the enemy time to analyze the situation. The moment the battleship at the center of their formation appeared, I activated the drones and ordered them to move towards it.

It was strange, that they didn't react for a few long seconds. They just waited, floating there as if they couldn't believe it. I guessed the swiftness and severity of the attack had shocked them into inaction. It couldn't be easy to realize you were suddenly surrounded by more than two thousand enemy crafts.

Then, they started shooting. High energy laser beams emerged out of the flanks of the four ships, tracking and burning down my drones. Two of the ships released simultaneous salvoes of missiles, but they were intercepted by a few of my machines, sacrificing themselves for the survival of the swarm.

I ordered the assault robots to let go of their vehicles and fall towards the battleship. They were still a good couple kilometers away, but they just had to coast at their current direction and speed. In the meantime, I set the drones that had transported them to swarm all around the place, creating chaos in the ship's sensors and diverting attention from the undefended wave of soldiers.

I smiled at the panicked enemy reaction that followed. From their point of view, the two thousand crafts surrounding them had suddenly multiplied by four. Their ships engaged their thrusters as if to leave, but they stopped as soon as they realized how ineffective that would be. They were surrounded, and no matter where they moved to, they would just run into more of my machines.

So they redoubled their efforts at shooting down the components of my swarm. Dozens of bright laser lines constantly appearing and disappearing, trying to destroy my machines as fast as possible. My soldiers, moving in a straight line towards their battleship were easier to track, so the enemy fire focused on them. They were killed by the hundreds.

But it didn't matter. I had thousands. They started landing all over the battleship's surface, using their claw-like fingers to grasp to the metallic hull. If the ship had a protective shield, it didn't make a difference. I had bet on their shields only reacting to energy discharges and fast moving projectiles, rather than the slower approach my soldiers were following. It seemed I had been right.

At more than 400 meters long, the enemy battleship was an impressive sight. A war machine covered in armor plates, missile batteries and laser projectors. It had been vehicles

such as this that had bombed Earth's cities from the safety of orbit.

It wasn't, however, protected against boarding by an assault army. My soldiers crawled all over the hull, finding weak points and unprotected openings. They went through exhaust vents and blew open loading gates, getting into the ventilation system, into the maintenance passageways...

Judging by the amount of casualties I was having, I supposed most other sane species considered this tactic too crazy, too suicidal to be useful. Just as I was thinking that, 170 of my soldiers instantly vanished from my perception, as I had failed to intercept a missile launched by one of the smaller defending ships.

Right. I had to do something about those other three. Some of the drones in the swarm were carrying nuclear warheads, so that was an option. But detonating them so close to the battleship I was assaulting would jeopardize the whole affair.

If only I had a way to force them to break formation...

With a mental shrug, I unfurled my radiators and started venting the heat that I had been keeping inside my body into space, the exposed surfaces rapidly becoming incandescent.

The reaction was immediate. The moment they realized the 27 kilometers long asteroid was, in fact, not an asteroid at all they turned to leave, abandoning their bigger sister to its own fate.

I didn't move to stop them, but I used the cover of the swarm to surreptitiously position a few of my nuclear carrying drones in the path they would take. Since they were

already surrounded by a host of small crafts spiraling around, they were none the wiser.

Back in the battleship, the fight was fierce. I could see through my soldiers' eyes that they had reached the main corridors -wide passageways with walls heavily decorated in a multitude of hieroglyphs- and were engaged in combat against the enemy troops.

It was the first time I saw *them* in the flesh. The creatures that had killed humanity. They were large hefty bipeds, almost twice as big as my own soldiers. Their heads were wide and squashed, with a complex structure of bony-looking plates protecting their top. They had four narrow eyes, two in front, two to the sides, and their mouths were hidden behind some sort of small tentacles hanging from where a nose would have been in a human face.

I had expected some sort of strong emotional response to my eventual face off against the monsters. Strange, that I didn't feel anything. Just some sort of detachment.

A stillness.

I simply ordered my army to open fire, to flank their positions, to charge at them even as I analyzed the images, classifying both the strengths and vulnerabilities in their anatomy. It didn't take long to get the upper hand. The Xunvirians had been completely unprepared to this kind of assault. They were wearing toga-like red and yellow uniforms rather than any sort of body armor, and they lacked in firepower, using only small energy handguns or ineffective melee weapons.

Outside, I verified that the three smaller runaway ships were at a sufficient range, and ordered the nuclear explosives to detonate. Two of the vessels vanished in an instant, along

with four hundred and seventeen of my nearby drones -I hadn't retracted the swarm as to not clue the enemy of what I was about to do.

The third vessel had survived, though. Its protective shield had encased the warship in a tight bubble that reflected all the colors in the rainbow. As I was looking, the ship returned fire at my main body, focusing all its lasers in a single and devastating attack. The overcharged beam hit the ceramic plates of my outer hull, vaporizing a hole and burning its way through them and into the second of my armor layers.

Two more nuclear detonations put an end to that.

In the battleship, the fight was also over, and already my soldiers were identifying the parts that made up the main fusion reactor, the warp engines, the different weapons and shield projectors... But even as they did that, I was already recalling most of my drones and assault troops back into my main body, leaving just an automated defense garrison and some worker drones in the conquered vessel.

I knew I didn't have time to waste. I would drop by later to collect the salvage, but right now I had to move fast. I had just kicked the wasps' nest, so to speak, and had to make use of the surprise factor while it lasted.

Engaging my main thrusters, I set course towards Ganymede.

Chapter 3

Daokat stared at his plate with a mix of fear and apprehension. The small meat filled dumplings floated in a bright and dense orange soup, as if daring him to take another bite.

He had made that mistake three minutes ago, and was still trying to recover from the shivers, numb mouth and itchy throat. Spicy... to call Xunvirian food spicy would be an understatement. No, rajan sauce was spicy. Lenyish tree-melons were spicy. But this... this was a health hazard passing as food.

He pushed the square plate a few inches away and took another sip from his drink, bracing for the impact of its deep bitter taste. He cursed himself again for listening to Nakstani's advice when ordering his food. He was still trying to figure out whether his new boss' suggestion had been an honest one, or if it had been a prank playing on his ignorance of Xunvirian cuisine.

Knowing her, probably both.

Daokat leaned back in his chair and gazed at his surroundings. The Hall of the Four Columns was one of the most luxurious rooms in Xunvir's Empyrean Palace, with tall ceilings engraved in hieroglyphics of gold and jade that told the history of the empire turned republic.

The ceiling was supported by the Columns, four massive pillars of glass that shone with their own pulsating light, bathing the room in a green glow.

And dwarfed by the columns, the guests dined, drank and mingled. The elite of the Xunvir Republic: admirals and tribe leaders, politicians and powerful businessmen. They talked in pairs and groups, walking around tables and servants, joking loudly to each other.

Playing with the steel pincer that served as a food utensil, Daokat wished once more he was anywhere but here. A few months ago, he had had a promising career laid out in front of him as a high ranking consulate delegate at one of the core worlds of the Galactic Federal Council.

But somehow, in a turn of events he hadn't even begun to really understand, he had ended up in the deep ass-end of the Orion Arm.

Eating Xunvirian dumplings.

He looked back at the guests, and saw his own boss among them. Nakstani was in the midst of it all, confidently talking to the Emperor himself.

Ambassador Nakstani of the Galactic Federal Council was an odd piece. Like himself, she was a Sanksian, coming from one of the oldest worlds in the Galactic Council. A lush and peaceful agrarian planet that lived mostly out of tourism.

Sanksians were nimble beings of thin bodies, large eyes and smooth silvery skins. Known for being polite and diligent. But where Daokat himself was a good example of that stereotype, his boss was anything but it.

Nakstani acted like she was a local herself, laughing with intensity, slapping the shoulders of whoever she was talking to, drinking and sampling every food... At first, Daokat had found the contrast between her behavior and her delicate looks to be striking, but it seemed it worked for the Xunvirians, and they treated her with respect.

The other reason, of course, was her role. As a representative of the Council, Nakstani might not have had a fleet of her own like some of the admirals in the room, but she had influence in spades. The kind of influence that came from representing an organization that covered over forty percent of the known Galaxy.

As Daokat watched, his boss bowed to the Emperor and walked back to their table. She plopped down on the seat in front of him, and eyed the discarded plate.

"Hey, kid. Aren't you going to eat that?" she asked, already reaching for a pincer.

"No," Daokat answered. "In fact, I suspect the sauce might be laced with some sort of hallucinogenic."

She tilted her head looking curiously at a dumpling, before stuffing it into her mouth. "Hmm... yeah, I think it is."

Daokat looked at her and shook his head. "Really? How can you eat that?"

"Ah, it's not that bad. Besides, nobody is going to tell you their secrets if you aren't willing to try their food first."

He nodded. "Secrets... right, I guess that's true."

She stopped chewing and stared at him for a few seconds with an inquisitorial gaze. Then she sighed. "All right, spit it

out."

"What?"

"Whatever it is that has you yellow-teethed. Look, I thought you wanted this position. To be here. An Assistant Ambassador. But obviously there's something you don't like, so spit it out already."

Daokat blinked at the brashness of the question. In his mind, ambassadors were supposed to be tactful and discreet. He wondered whether it'd be a good idea to answer truthfully, but there weren't many ways in which he could be further punished. It wasn't like he could be sent off to an even less pleasant destination than the Xunvir Republic.

"Yes," he admitted. "I did want the Assistant position. Just... not *here*. I applied to Nayatan Prime, but it seems someone upstairs wanted to punish me by sending me to this..."

Daokat stopped at the bewildered look his boss was giving him.

"You think you were punished?"

"Well... sure. Why other reason would they send me here, as far away into the periphery as possible?"

Nakstani was repressing a laugh. "Oh... you're such a cursed fool... They sent you here because I specifically *asked* for you!"

Daokat's eye membranes did a funny twitch.

"You did... what... why?"

She stuffed another dumpling into her mouth. "Because I read your examination essay, the one where you talked about making a difference. Because I thought you'd want to be someplace important."

"I was going someplace important. Like the Core Worlds, not here!"

"I see. Nayatan Prime?" she asked.

"Well, yes. Nayatan Prime is where High Governance is based out of. It's where all the Grand Ministers are. All the action is there."

She snorted. "Bullshit."

Daokat was about to reply when she interrupted him, leaning forward and speaking in a lower tone.

"No, listen to me now, Daokat. Nayatan Prime? It's bullshit. Yes, all the bigwigs are there, all the celebrities. They get together, throw some large party, some charity fundraiser or something to appear in the network vids and get their ten minutes of fame, all the while you are left to send the invites. You go there, you turn into a glorified paper pusher."

He shook his head, raising his voice. "Nayatan Prime is where the Fifth Accords were signed, for crying out loud!"

"Where they were signed, sure. But where do you think they were *negotiated*?" She motioned at the Hall around them with the pincer in her hand. "It was in rooms like this. This is the *frontier*, kid. This is where the rubber meets the road, where the real action is. That next volume in the history lessons? That next war that will shape the destiny of entire worlds? It starts here, in this room. Right now."

She eyed a couple of high ranking Xunvirian officers as they passed by their table. "Might have already started, in fact," she added.

The revelation had left Daokat paused, not knowing how to react. If what Nakstani was saying was true, not only he hadn't been punished in the first place, but he had been *handpicked* by her for an important position. One that wouldn't take him in front of the cameras, maybe, but important nevertheless.

He didn't have time to feel like an idiot, though. If what she said was true, he had to get his head back in the game. The last sentence had piqued his interest.

"Do you mean the reports were true? The Xunvirian Fleet *is* mobilizing?"

She nodded, stealing a sip from his drink. "The Third Fleet left port two weeks ago. The First and Fourth both leave in three days. Seems like the Xunvir Republic is going to war."

"Shit... offensive or defensive?"

She tilted her head and smiled at him. "You tell me, kid."

A test. But Daokat knew what she meant, she had explained the day before. There was a certain *feeling* to these meetings. An emotional energy in the air, in the way people acted. In the way they talked and moved. You just had to know how to read between lines.

He looked around discreetly. The Xunvirians appeared relaxed, joking and drinking. He saw a group of tribe leaders burst into raucous laughter, slapping each other's shoulders.

Except it looked a bit over the top. And as he stared more intently, he started to notice the little details. The underlying patterns. The Emperor was talking to everyone, but he never strayed far from his own guards. The tribe leaders were joking, but their reactions seemed forced, as if their attention was someplace else. The admirals were all in their own little group, talking in hasty tones. Discussing war strategies, maybe?

Nakstani was examining him. "So?"

"Defensive. They are spooked," Daokat said.

"Ah... I knew there was a reason I hired you after all. Go on."

"They are projecting an image of strength," he elaborated, "but they are nervous at the same time. It's all a facade, they are worried about something but don't want to look like they are weak."

"And what do you think could have caused that?"

Daokat thought for a minute. "Internal strife? A coup attempt, perhaps?"

Nakstani shook her head. "I don't think so. All factions are represented here. Whatever it is, they all are in it together."

"So, an external enemy," he concluded.

She nodded. "If you ask me, I'd say someone has seen a bushcat lurking around and they're all circling the plumps now."

"The what now?"

"The plumps? The grass-munchers?"

"The cows?" he ventured.

"The... yes, the *cows*... Seriously? Haven't you ever been to a long grazing?"

"No," Daokat replied. "I was raised in Gorge City."

"Ah... a cursed urbanite. That explains a thing or two about you. Anyways, yes. An external enemy. They have been attacked."

He nodded. The more he thought about it, the clearer it was. An external menace was the only thing that could have united the different tribes and factions that made up Xunvir's higher social layer. It would be a good motivation to put their differences aside for the time being.

But still, there was something that didn't fit.

"So why not ask us for help?" Daokat said. "The Xunvir Republic is an associated state to the Council. Per the accords we are obligated to support them in a defensive war against an external aggressor."

Nakstani smiled. "That's the question, isn't it? What do you think?"

Daokat paused and reviewed what he knew about the Republic, its power structure and internal issues, trying to look at the question from a new angle.

"It's political. Asking for help now would make the ruling tribe seem weak, and hurt their chances at keeping the Emperor position in the elections next year."

"Hmm... you are learning. But no, that wouldn't explain why all the other factions are keeping their mouths shut as well."

"Then why?" he asked. But before she could reply, he continued speaking his thoughts. "I mean, if the message of strength is not directed at one of the factions, then who else is in here that..."

He paused, as he considered who else was in the room.

Themselves.

That was it. Clear as day. A message of strength, of unity. Directed at the Galactic Federal Council. At them two.

The Republic was going to war. The Galactic Council knew. The Republic knew that they knew, and they were delivering their message.

Keep your snouts out of our business.

This entire dinner was a farce. A play. And they two were at the center of it. He felt a shiver down his spine as he imagined the gaze of every other dinner guest in the room staring down his back, scrutinizing his every gesture.

And Nakstani's behavior... drinking, joking, talking to everyone... it had been another message. A reply of her own.

No.

As he considered the implications, Nakstani leaned towards him and spoke with a smile. "Ah, now you see it... why you should have eaten your cursed dumplings."

Daokat nodded slowly, still frozen and with his hands laid flat on the table. His heart was beating fast.

So, this was what the infamous *game* played like. The real stuff. Threats and bluffs masquerading as jokes and spicy

sauces.

Ironic, that he had wanted to be someplace important and now, when he was right at the heart of a burgeoning conflict, the crucial signs had all gone over his head.

At last, he rose his gaze to look back at his boss, who had an amused expression in her face.

"They are hiding something," Daokat said. "They don't want us to interfere because there's something they don't want us to know."

Nakstani's smile transformed into a predatory grin, one that somehow didn't look out of place with her delicate features. "And doesn't that," she said, "make you *just* a little bit curious?"

She was right, of course. He was curious. The Xunvir Republic had been attacked, but they were trying to hide it. Why? Because there must be something, some critical piece of information, that they wanted to keep secret. Something that could have tremendous consequences if divulged.

"We need to learn who is behind it," Daokat said. "Who is attacking them."

"Agreed. Which is why you have a meeting in about ten minutes with... ah..." she paused for a moment, and Daokat could see bright yellow lines appear in her eyes as she connected her augmented irises, "one Corvette Captain Avamir of the Buplan Tribe."

Daokat blinked. "You've got a mole?... Sorry, stupid question. Of course you've got a mole."

"And you've got a meeting. Third level, eastern terrace. I suggest you get going." Nakstani said as she laid back on her seat, drink in hand. "Don't worry, I'll stay here and hold the fort."

"Right," he said, but he was already standing up, walking out of the Hall. His legs felt stiff and his movements rigid. He concentrated on keeping a regular, normal-looking pace, not too anxious or so slow it would look deliberate. He tried avoiding the gazes of the other guests without looking like he was shunning them.

It was harder than it seemed.

The terrace, a large expanse of marble overlooking the Palace's lush gardens, was empty when Daokat arrived. He walked past the bronze statues depicting long dead military heroes, each with a small placard underneath telling their stories. Which tribe they belonged to, which long forgotten battles they had fought.

Entire lives summed up in three sentences long blurbs.

He paused by the edge of the balcony, placing his hands on the intricately decorated stone handrail. At night, the gardens surrounding the palace were plunged in shadows, and it looked as if the building was surrounded by pure blackness, like a small boat of stone floating in a sea of nothingness.

And beyond the black expanse, he could see the myriad city lights of the Xunvirian capital covering the horizon. The traffic crawling towards the spaceport, the Twin Avenues, the spiraling towers that the powerful Anacax tribe had built in the commercial district...

In a way it was fitting that the Palace representing the old imperial age was separated from the more modern city, symbol of a nascent interstellar economy. Ever since he arrived, Daokat had always been aware of the sense of melancholic decadence impregnating everything related to Xunvir's imperial past.

But there were high hopes for the Republic, back at the core worlds. It was expected that the Xunvirians would be ready to apply for a membership to the Galactic Council in about fifty years. Nakstani's and Daokat's job was not just to act as representatives, but to gently steer the policymakers in the right direction. To make sure the remaining political reforms would take place before that happened.

He was optimistic, but sadly, the Republic hadn't completely recovered from the shock of the military disaster that had lost them their empire, and a sense of fatalism mixed with compensating self-importance still lingered. He feared that a war, at this delicate moment, could jeopardize everything.

His augmented irises warned him of the approaching figure even before his own eyes could register it. A Xunvirian. He waited for the local to approach, enabling the recording function of the irises. He was still thinking of an opening line when the Xunvirian spoke in a thick guttural accent.

"Ah, the deceptive lizard doesn't deem me worthy of her time, so she sends her lackey, yes?"

Daokat tensed his jaw as the large creature approached. No matter how much time he spent in this planet, there would always be a part of his primordial brain sounding the alarms whenever a Xunvirian was close by. Some sort of evolutive survival response.

But he wasn't a small animal running from a predator across the grass fields of his homeworld. Galactic politics wasn't about who was bigger or stronger, but about who had the most influence and leverage.

And that was him.

"Corvette Captain Avamir," Daokat said with a confident smile. "My name is Daokat, I'm the Assistant Ambassador. Nakstani sends her apologies, she couldn't excuse herself from the dinner party. But I can assure you I speak in her behalf."

Avamir made a short puffing sound, the tentacles in front of his mouth raising slightly. "Just ask what you want."

Daokat nodded. "Very well. We would like to know why the Xunvirian Fleet is mobilizing. You are with the First, correct?"

"Yes. We are mobilizing in response to an attack."

That was it. Confirmation. Daokat had to repress a smile. "What happened?" he asked.

The Xunvirian took a few seconds to reply. Daokat was about to repeat the question when he started speaking again.

"Two months ago, we lost contact with a group of resource scanning ships in one of our uninhabited external systems. Two days later, the squadron sent in their search was lost too, followed by an attack against an advanced frontier outpost."

He paused again, as if he was having difficulty getting the words out.

"We attempted several incursions to retake control over the system, all of which were repelled. Four weeks ago, the entire Sixth fleet gathered at the closest neighboring star in order to lead a massive counterattack, but they were surprised by the enemy before they could put the plan into motion. There were no survivors."

Daokat let out a breath as he processed the information. "You're telling me you've already lost an entire fleet. An entire fleet and a star system?"

Avamir huffed. "No. We have lost two fleets and three systems," he corrected. "All of the systems were unpopulated. But judging by the advance of the attackers, we expect them to reach the first of our inhabited planets in less than a week. The remaining fleets are mobilizing to protect the colony."

"Where? Which colony?"

"Yovit."

Daokat nodded, he had read about the planet before. With two million settlers already, it was one of the most promising newly claimed worlds, and the Republic was investing a good amount of resources in its development.

"One more thing," he said. "Who is attacking you, and why?"

The Xunvirian bobbed his head, slow and deliberate. "Hmm... you have heard of the pain proverb, yes?"

He had. "Yes. Pain breeds pain."

"Pain breeds pain. There is no escape from the ghosts of our own past. We must fight the wars that our forefathers sow."

Daokat repressed a sigh. The last thing he wanted now was a lesson on Xunvirian fatalism, on how every disgrace -ranging from diseases to earthquakes- was somehow a fault of their ancestors.

"So, you mean..." he started.

"I am not a traitor," Avamir interrupted. "I told your master that. What I do, I do it because it is righteous, yes?"

Daokat nodded.

"The Tribes are wrong to hide what might affect your Council. It's not proper, to deny others the right of knowing their fate. But now that you know, I'm not obliged anymore. Yes?"

The Xunvirian was already turning to leave.

"Wait! Who is attacking you?" asked Daokat. "Does this ghost have a name?" .

"Yes," said Avamir without turning back. "The Terran."

He walked away with that, leaving Daokat alone again in the terrace. He just stood there, processing the information. Finally, he opened a line back to Nakstani and sent her the recording from his irises.

"Got that?" he asked her, sub-vocalizing the voice message.

He heard her response directly in his right ear. "Yes," she said. "Not much. Never heard of these Terrans before. But at least now we know where the fleets are going to."

"The colony world. Yovit. Any ideas of what we should do next?"

The line went silent for a few seconds, and he started walking back towards the dinning hall. Eventually, his boss spoke again.

"Ah... Daokat," she said, "didn't you say you were from an agricultural world?"

He frowned at the question. What was she playing at? They were both from the same world, so of course she already knew... And just then, he realized the hidden message.

Despite himself, Daokat had to smile.

"Sure I am," he said, playing along. "And ever since I've got here I've been curious about Xunvirian agricultural techniques and farming policies. Like, say... the ones they use in their colony worlds."

"Oh, really? Well, in that case we should make an official visit to one of them. I've heard Yovit is lovely this time of year. I guess we could leave tomorrow morning."

"That would be great, Nakstani! I can't wait to see how the Xunvirians deal with their *plumps*"

Chapter 4

I entered the living room carrying the blanket on my right arm. It was a woolen, hand-knitted patchwork of green, brown and blue colors. It hung from my arm, weighting it down, skimming right over the wooden boarded floor but without ever dragging on it.

I walked slowly, deliberately. There was a certain ritualistic approach to my movements. There had to be.

The living room was lit in the orange glow coming through its single window, bathed in the colors of a Sunday afternoon; the dying of the day casting long shadows across the floor, across the table and couch.

I paused briefly right in front of the brown couch, then turned on my feet and sit on it, placing the blanket on the seat next to me. Slowly, I leaned sideways and rested my head on the armrest. After a beat, I rose my legs and placed them on the couch too.

I lay there, my body sprawled across the three seats. Of course, the piece of furniture wasn't as long as a bed, so I had to keep my knees somewhat bent to fit in it. The posture created a bit of a strain in the artificial muscular tissue that covered my legs, but it was supposed to do that. It was supposed to be ever so slightly uncomfortable, but not unpleasant enough that I would need to move and change posture.

With a precise motion I unfolded the blanket and covered my body with it, from the legs and up to my chest. I doubted for a moment whether to place my arms over or under the blanket, unsure as to which was the *correct* way to go about it. The perfect resting posture. Eventually, I left them uncovered.

The TV in front of the couch was turned on, broadcasting some old show I haven't watched before, the images having that noisy grain that dated them to sometime during the eighties.

Of course, it's not that I didn't *know* the name of the show. Or its length, the actual date of airing of each of its 28 episodes -the one now playing on TV was the sixth-, the name and date of birth of each of its leading actors, or where I had found the tapes -a television archive building in what had been the city of Atlanta, one that I had completely digitized before leaving Earth.

But I tried to shy away from that knowledge, pretending I didn't know all that. Pretending I had just turned on the TV and this was what happened to be on it.

It wasn't working. Not fully. But it was as close as I dared going, short of intentionally deleting that knowledge from my databanks.

Had I had eyelids, I would have them half-closed by now. But the body I was controlling was just another one of my robotic soldiers, and I hadn't designed them with this purpose in mind. I could have turned off its two cameras, but it just wouldn't have felt the same. So I simply adjusted their focus until the image I got from them was slightly blurred.

It would have to do.

All of this was, of course, a crude mockery. A doomed attempt at recapturing a memory. At feeling again that sense of warmth, of calmness, that came with spending a Sunday afternoon lying on the sofa, balancing in that narrow sweet spot between awareness and sleep.

Except things were somewhat *off*. The room felt different somehow, though I couldn't quite put my finger on what was wrong. Was the ceiling just a bit too tall, or too short? How many inches had the TV screen had? How many feet had separated it from the couch?

If felt as if someone had ran through my stuff and put everything out of place. I could tell things were wrong, but the memories weren't precise enough, clear enough, as to know how to fix those same mistakes. I knew the couch's fabric had had some sort of faded pattern, but I couldn't for the life of me recall what it had looked like.

But the most glaring hole in the memory was the other presence that had been there with me. I knew I hadn't been alone when resting like this, drifting off to sleep. Someone had sat with me, on the same couch. I recalled jokes. I recalled someone massaging my legs.

And yet I couldn't recall their face. Their looks. Who they had been. I knew that person had been important, but not *why*.

This, the whole experience, was an exercise in frustration. In trying to reach at something that was always moving away, that slipped through my fingers the moment I thought I had a grasp on it. But it was important that I kept trying.

It grated on me, that the most vital memories, the ones tying me back to humanity, were also the most blurred ones. The most imprecise. The most filled with gaps.

All the while I could construct a perfect replica of a Xunvirian laser projector. Down to the identifying serial codes in each electronic board.

I was constructing them at that very moment, in fact. Four hundred and sixteen of them to join my other two thousand, three hundred seventy-nine projectors I had already installed in drones and crafts across my fleet.

I had been busy.

Even as I lay on the sofa, purposely not watching the TV, my awareness kept working on several simultaneous levels. I could see the outside of the living room -a plywood construction I had erected inside one of the smaller storage areas in my main body. I could see the space surrounding me, my extended panels bathed by the faint orange light of the twin stars at the center of the Luhman system.

I was aware of the more than seven million machines that now composed my swarm. They were distributed across three stellar systems under my control, most of the drones tasked with different kinds of resource extraction. Minerals, radioactive materials, gases, water... All the work, the extraction, transportation, refining and construction of new units controlled by the central servers in my main body, instantaneously transmitting commands both through the EM-spectrum and via my new quantum-entangled relays.

I had become a nation of a single mind.

Paradoxically, I had the Xunvir Republic to thank for my exponential growth. It was the fusion plants of their own design that satisfied the increasing energy appetite of the swarm. It was their communication devices and optimized processing algorithms that allowed my brain to coordinate

so many machines. It was their warp engines that had enabled me to expand beyond Earth's solar system.

And more importantly, it was their past actions, their attack on Earth, that still fueled my determination.

They had been aggressive at first, sending their warship squadrons after me. But they hadn't put a strong enough front, maybe not considering me an important threat, so it hadn't been hard to come out ahead.

Then, they wised up, sending a strong and coordinated attack force to face me. Had they done that at the beginning, they could have won. But by the time they had reacted, I was already strong enough to stomp on their forces.

After that, the Xunvirians had shifted to a defensive stance, no doubt grouping around their nearest colony world. It would fall on me to start the next confrontation.

All around me, my attack swarm gathered. More than four hundred thousand offensive drones and assault soldiers. There were so many of them that they looked like a moving fluid. The machines danced and flowed in tight fractal formations, following complex patterns that weaved them together without ever crashing into each other. They enveloped me like a living, metallic blanket. Like some sort of twisted mirroring of what was happening inside the plywood room.

There were so many of them that it was impossible for me to stuff them into my main body anymore. Transportation, and not manufacturing, now marked the limits of my attack strength. So I had resorted to building support carrier ships.

At roughly two kilometers long each, the support ships featured a miniaturized version of my own body design, with compartments for carrying drones and soldiers, but also assembly factories, raw material storage areas, shield projectors, power plants, laser weaponry and warp drives.

The only thing missing was a mind of their own. Just like the drones themselves, the support ships were under my direct control. An extension of myself rather than separate entities.

That was another of the boundaries. Another line I wasn't willing to cross. I wouldn't give self-awareness to what I intented to use as a mere weapon of war. Like the drones, the support ships were disposable too.

Which meant I couldn't just send my swarm to attack while I stayed put behind, safe within my controlled territories. Even the quantum relays weren't perfect. Their bandwidth was limited, and if I tried to directly control the complex interwoven movements of hundreds of thousands of drones through them, there would be several seconds of delay before my orders reached their recipients. A delay that could cost me a battle.

No. I would need to be in the frontlines, directing the machines' movements with precision. Risking my own body.

I guessed I could have built back up servers in my stellar systems, though. Some sort of failsafe, a clone of my mind that would persist even if my main body was destroyed.

It would be the smart thing to do. The optimal. But I didn't like it, the idea of my consciousness being some fluid thing. The idea of losing contact by mistake, and coming back to find out another *me* had taken over.

Stupid? Perhaps. I knew I was putting obstacles in my own way, deliberately falling short of my full potential. But I felt I needed this, these anchors. To prevent me from going down the ever dangerous slope.

Vengeance was important. But so was remaining human. Not losing myself. Because as long as I did, as long as I could keep me from becoming something else, then humanity itself would exist with me. There would still be a faint glimmer of hope. As long as I was human, then we wouldn't be extinct. So I couldn't afford to be consumed. To turn into a mindless weapon of mass destruction.

That didn't mean I planned to die anytime soon, though. I had upgraded my body, improved its armor with the new material techniques I had developed, installed shield projectors based on Xunvirian designs... and a warp drive that was currently charging for the imminent faster than light trip.

I commanded the support ships to spool their warp drives too. Turned out warp tunneling was dependent on mass. The bigger the object, the more power it required. And having to move a 27 kilometers long object, the warp drive in my main body had some crazy energy requirements. It took my power plants several minutes to feed it before each activation.

I felt nervous as I secured the last of my drones in their compartments. As I sent the orders that the factories and the other machines I was leaving behind would follow in my absence. It was always like this before a trip, but this time I knew it would be harder. I would be jumping straight into a battlefield. Into an enemy trap.

Steeling myself, I activated the warp drives.

Right away, I went blind and deaf, losing contact with the rest of my machines. I was now only aware of the drones within my own body. There was no way to communicate to the external world while in warp.

It made me feel small. I was getting used to my expanded awareness, to being *present* across different stellar systems. To the almost omniscient view I had over my domains. This, going back to the constraints of a single view, the physical limits of a single ship, felt almost like being caged.

It made me feel anxious and vulnerable. The trip would only take about twenty minutes, but to the rest of the universe more than three days would have passed by the time I emerged back into normal space.

I was all too aware of how defenseless my other machines would be during that time. They had their orders and were autonomous enough as to not stop in their tracks, but I couldn't kid myself. Should the Xunvirians choose to attack my solar systems now, my drones would be an easy prey without myself to direct them.

It spoke volumes of why the Xunvirian fleets moved the way they did, continuously making short warp jumps rather than long leaps. Like stones skipping on a lake's surface, always popping in and out warp as to avoid unpleasant surprises.

Sadly, it just wasn't a viable strategy for me. With my massive vehicles, each FTL ticket was an expensive investment with a long setup. Making too many of them would be prohibitive.

There just wasn't anything I could do other than wait, cross my fingers, and hope that I wouldn't come out of warp to find my home razed and burned, so to speak.

So I waited, going over possible attack plans and flying patterns.

Meanwhile, in the living room, I shifted my body to relieve the strain in my legs.

Leaving warp was as sudden as entering it had been. One moment I was blind, the next I could see. Millions of machines popping into my awareness, petabytes of information being downloaded into my brain as the pending logs finally reached me.

My mind started working, shifting through the enormous pile of data, discarding irrelevant information and integrating the important bits into my memory banks. To my conscious mind, it felt as if I had never left. I had perfect recollection of everything that happened in my absence, all the while I perfectly remembered being in warp, unable to communicate.

It was yet another of the oddities of my strange new nature.

I went through my memories of the last three days. A couple factories had stopped production due to running out of input materials. Seventeen drones had been destroyed in a pipe collapse in the Centauri system. More than four thousand others had landed in their respective home hangars after encountering maintenance problems of some kind or other.

Nothing to worry about. I absentmindedly sent the commands to deal with each of the situations, and focused my attention on my immediate surroundings.

The colony world floated at eighty thousand kilometers away from me. A sphere of green, brown and blue hues. Its

bright, colorful tones contrasted with the pure black of space, making it stand out like a floating jewel.

It was beautiful.

It only served to make me angrier. That it was just like Earth had once looked. That the Xunvirians got to enjoy this safe, beautiful world even after having wrecked ours.

That crimes didn't have any repercussions.

That the universe, that life itself, kept going on in spite of our tragedy. That we had been forgotten.

No. That wouldn't do.

In orbit, right between the planet and my own position, there was the Xunvirian fleet. With thirteen battleships and their escorting vessels, it was the largest combined fleet I had ever faced so far.

And they had, indeed, wised up. Their warships groups were arrayed in a large arching formation, leaving tens of kilometers of empty space between each other. Making sure, I noticed, that I wouldn't be able to wrap them all in the thick of my swarm at the same time.

The enemy started to react, turning their flanks toward me, but they hadn't open fire yet, holding formation. They showered me in messages. Transmissions asking for a truce, for a negotiation.

I gave those the same treatment that humanity's own pleas had been given.

I weighed my options. Their plan, I realized, was both simple and hard to counter.

If I tried to attack them all at the same time, my machines would be too dispersed to be effective. That meant I would need to work my way through their ships instead, one after the other.

But focusing my strength in a single target would free the other enemies to flank me and shoot at both me and my drones from the safety of distance, using the greater range of their energy weapons.

Could I win? Yes... maybe. My own body was now protected by shields specifically designed to withstand laser fire; and even though the drones were vulnerable, at the end of the day I had the advantage of numbers... of *very large* numbers. So probably I would have enough drones as to work through their entire fleet ship by ship and come out victorious.

But the losses would be astonishing. Most if not all my machines would be destroyed in the process. My body would need repairs. I could win but... would that be a worthwhile victory, or just a losing strategy? One that could make me weaker in the long run, unable to survive at some critical juncture in the future.

I could just ignore their warships and dive in for the kill. Send all my swarm to ravage the world they were tasked with protecting. They wouldn't be able to stop me.

But then, what? After I destroyed their world, I would still need to face off their warships. Running away wasn't an option given how long my warp drive took to charge. And I'd be put into a worse tactical position, having already committed my army to a ground attack.

What other options were there? Sending a couple drones armed with nuclear warheads towards each of their ships?

No. It would be obvious, and the machines would be shot down long before they could reach their targets.

Using nuclear drones was a collaborative task. One craft delivered the payload, while the rest provided cover, chaos, and decoys. But again, trying to do that simultaneously against all the enemy ships would disperse my swarm too thinly. It was self-defeating.

So... yes. The Xunvirian strategy was simple, but hard to counter.

We stood there for a few instants of stand-off. Facing each other. No talking on my part, no radio communications.

Three seconds later I was joined by my eight support ships, popping out into normal space by my side.

Ah...

Chapter 5

Daokat's legs hurt. It was a deep, constant pain that increased with every movement, accompanied by a stiffness that slowly but surely had spread to envelop his whole body over the last days.

In a way, he was surprised. He had always been taught that his species had evolved to jog up and down the expansive grass hills of his homeplanet, and that this was the reason Sanksians were so good at walking in uneven terrain.

Well, apparently someone forgot to tell that to Daokat's body.

He had spent the last days a hostage of Yovit's Commissary of Agriculture, the effusive -and surprisingly short- Xunvirian informing him of everything there was to know and more about farming and planting in a colony world.

They had visited irrigation projects, oxygenic tree plantations, mountain farms, ground decalcification facilities, river fish farms, redgrass fields, ball-tree farms, valley sweet-thorn cultivation works... and all the other places whose names Daokat couldn't and didn't care to remember.

If he didn't know better, he would have thought the Commissary suspected the visit motives were a fabrication and was punishing him for it. But no, either the Xunvirian was a great actor, or his intentions were honest. And Daokat

leaned towards the latter. There simply was a certain mindset to people who willingly chose to move to a new world. A colony in the periphery of the Republic, which itself was in the periphery of the galaxy. To a world in development, without the comforts of civilization.

Colonies attracted a certain kind of people. Honest, enthusiast and hardworking. A mindset that was increasingly rare among the inhabitants of the large metropolis where Daokat had spent most of his formative years.

He walked up to his room's window and looked at Yovit's biggest -and to his opinion, only- city. The town's location had been carefully chosen. It was built in a natural bay that gave its settlers access to the planet's single large ocean, but whose surrounding mountains protected it from the worse of the seasonal storms that periodically battered the continent.

It was a mix and match of prefabricated boxy white houses, warehouses and workshops. Here and there, high rise constructions of bare concrete and steel emerged from the sea of houses; such as the lodging he was staying at -he refused to dignify the place by referring to it as a *hotel*.

The wide avenues, decorated with the local lush trees, only made the lack of actual motorized traffic even more apparent. While the main city enjoyed far more activity than the other towns Daokat had been recently visiting, it would be a far call to say it was *bustling*.

In some sense, Daokat felt as if he had somehow traveled back in time, or was visiting some sort of pre-space faring civilization. The town, the whole colony, had an outdated air to it. The avenues would suddenly turn into dirt roads,

forcing the ground vehicles to default to dangerous manual piloting; or sometimes he would come across a small house made entirely out of wood, of all things.

It made for an odd contrast with the scattered displays of high technology he could glimpse at times. The recycling plants in particular were state of the art even by Council standards. And the spaceport -right across the street from the building he was at- featured an endless showcase of modern Xunvirian starships entering and leaving the planet's atmosphere.

He could even see the Embassy's ship, the white wedge-shaped vehicle with gold accents and elegant designs etched in its surface that Nakstani and him had used to get there. It was parked right at the edge of the enormous bare expanse of asphalt that was Yovit's only spaceport.

He glanced across the bay towards the Colonial Directorate Building, where his boss was at the moment.

Always one step ahead, Nakstani had excused herself out of the agrarian excursion and decided to stay at the Directorate, "visiting" the local governors and high ranking officers. The reasoning -she had explained to him in private- was that should the planet be attacked, its defense would be coordinated out of that building. Being there when that happened, she had said, would give them first hand information on Xunvir's enemies.

Daokat suspected her true reasons had more to do with aching legs and long winded explanations on water reprocessing techniques.

He relaxed his eye membranes, letting them water his tired eyes, and slowly sat down in the room's only chair -which *creaked* under his weight, the cursed thing. Letting out a

breath, he activated his augmented irises and started going through the documents and the work he had been neglecting for the past days.

He was reading a long winded explanation of the Republic's proposed amendment to the export treaties, trying for the second time to unpack a particularly annoying sentence, when a link to his boss opened.

"Hi, Daokat," she said. "Have any plans for this afternoon?"

Even when sub-vocalizing, Daokat could pick up on a terse tone. Or maybe he was just imagining things.

"Yes, actually. I'm visiting an animal food reprocessing facility. Why don't you join me? I'm sure you'll enjoy it," he replied, half jokingly.

"Ah... Maybe you should consider getting a sprained tendon or something? Stay here this afternoon?"

He paused. No, he hadn't imagined anything. Something was going on.

"Wait... is it happening now?"

As the only response, he received a vid link. He opened it, a floating screen only he could see appearing in mid-air.

It was a direct feed from her irises, showing him what she was seeing. Nakstani was at some sort of control room, standing next to a large screen along a group of Xunvirian colonial officers. The screen showed a view of Yovit from orbit, the fleet of defensive military ships clearly visible. And a purple icon, indicating...

"An incoming warp tunnel," Daokat muttered.

"Yes. Time to collapse is three hours. It could be a civilian vessel, but..."

"No flight plan?" he ventured, reading the screen. All civilian ships were supposed to relay their warp jump plans to the authorities ahead of time.

"No."

They remained in silence for a few seconds.

"Should I join you there?" he said at last.

"No. You're one street away from the spaceport as it is. If we have to evacuate, go to our ship and wait for me there."

He nodded, then muttered an affirmative when he realized she couldn't see him.

"Keep this vid link opened, though," she added.

They went back to a tense silence, watching the countdown timer. Meanwhile, Daokat composed a short message to the Commissary of Agriculture excusing himself out of the afternoon's activities. A sprained tendon.

Sometime later, he watched through Nakstani's feed as a group of military officers entered the control room and started evicting all the civilians. They tried to kick her out of the room too, but she very calmly declared having direct authorization by the Emperor himself to oversee any military operations.

Daokat snorted, but the Xunvirians appeared to buy the bluff and let her stay. Or maybe they just had more urgent stuff to worry about.

In the screen, the timer was down to one hour.

Daokat opened the large cabinet in his room and took a small travel bag. He placed in it the synthetic food bars and medical supplies that he always traveled with in case of an emergency. Then, he added some extra clothing items and the energy handgun all Council Embassy members were issued with.

Just in case.

Half an hour. The Xunvirian fleet had adopted a strange and very sparse formation in front of the warp tunnel's estimated exit point. Daokat absentmindedly looked up at the sky from his window, but of course he couldn't see anything. Just a blue sky with some puffy white clouds.

In the avenue outside, the sparse traffic flowed as usual. Daokat almost expected sirens to have gone off by now, but it seemed the Xunvirians were either confident they would come ahead, or they were still playing their cards close to their chests. He wondered if his and Nakstani's presence in the colony had anything to do with that.

It's not like there were many places for the locals to take refuge in, though. Their best option would be running out of the city and into the farmlands and mountains surrounding it. Evacuating the planet, as always, was also out of the question. In the history of the Council, many military leaders had proposed plans for evacuating worlds in case of a military attack, but invariably they tended to be infeasible.

Planets with large populations were simply impossible to evacuate in time, even when dedicating entire transport fleets to the task. And Colonies like Yovit had most of their population dispersed across the land, in places where

transportation was spotty and there was no easy access to a spaceport.

And even if there had been a way to evacuate the civilians, they'd be put in orbit, right in the middle of the upcoming space battle. Right where they could be easily captured or mistaken for combatant vessels.

No, the best recommendation in case of a planetary assault was to hunker down and weather the worst of it. Civilians were usually respected, and eventually wars ended, treaties were signed, and a solution was reached for the local populations.

If the Terrans won here, they'd take over the colony and set their own interim government that could last months. It would give Nakstani and him the opportunity to talk formally with the newly discovered species, while also overseeing the Xunvirian population wasn't mistreated.

But it wouldn't hurt to be prepared in case they had to hunker down themselves, he thought eyeing the travel bag. Or if Nakstani decided it would be better to leave the planet altogether and take their chances up in orbit.

Soon after the counter had reached twenty minutes, the screen shifted from the orbital view to a detailed zoomed-in visual of the projected exit point.

Ten minutes. Even through the feed, Daokat could feel how tense Nakstani was. No joking this time.

Five minutes. Daokat closed his travel bag and placed it in the center of the room, sitting back in the chair. He glanced at the cabinet and the expensive outfits he would be leaving behind, but quickly focused back on the vid link.

One minute. Nakstani let out a breath. Daokat realized he was holding one of his own.

Thirty seconds. This was it.

Ten. He watched as the countdown timer went through the last numbers.

Five. His eye membranes contracted almost on their own, as if to protect the delicate eyeballs.

Three. Two. One.

Zero.

The instant seemed to stretch, lasting forever as if they were caught inside some sort of time dilation effect. And for a single, hopeful moment, Daokat was sure that the timer would update again to simply show *plus One*, the Terrans having missed their appointment. And then time would return to its normal speed, and he would relax, and Nakstani would make some joke at the...

The image in the screen changed.

The first thought was one of incomprehension. Daokat had expected an enemy fleet to pour out of warp, with battleships and escorting cruisers and formations and all that. But that wasn't what had happened. No, clearly there was *something* out there, but he couldn't make sense of the image.

Then, the view zoomed out, putting the image in context. And he understood.

It was impossible, of course. They would have known. The Galactic Council would have known, were there a civilization

in the Orion Arm capable of building such a thing. The amount of resources involved, the amount of time, of energy to put that monster into space...

And yet, there it was. A starship the size of a city. As in defiance to the laws of physics and economics.

Many expletives crossed his mind, competing for attention. But somehow he couldn't opt for *just* one of them. There wasn't a word to reflect the astonishment, the complete impossibility of the scene. So he remained silent.

Nakstani, of course, didn't have such problems.

"Just who these cursed mulch smoking bastards picked a fight with..." she was muttering.

He was still trying to process the implications when the image changed again, new ships joining the oversized monster. It now looked closer to what Daokat had originally expected: a flagship with its escorting vessels.

Except that each of the smaller vehicles were large enough as to qualify as flagships on their own. Larger than any capital ship in any of the fleets of the nations that formed the Galactic Council.

Odds were, he realized, that he was looking at the nine biggest starships in the entire galaxy.

"Ah..." he said to no one.

And then, just as Daokat thought he couldn't be more surprised, the screen started filling in hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of icons as new contacts appeared. Entire waves of smaller vehicles coming out of the larger ships.

There were so many of them the sensors couldn't keep pace. The red icons moved and danced around the massive vessels as if they were schools of fish around a giant sea creature. Like a... a *swarm.* There wasn't any better word to describe it.

He absentmindedly noticed he was back to a standing position, having left the chair at some point during the last moments. But he paid it no attention. In the screen, the Terrans were beginning their attack, moving as a large group towards one of the defending battleships, apparently chosen at random.

"Are the Xunvirians trying to contact them?" Daokat asked.

"Yes," his boss replied. "I got them to add our own message too. But no response so far."

Daokat felt a strange anger at the developing situation. It almost seemed *obscene*. To use such a display of force, to make such an overwhelmingly powerful attack against such a small colony world. As if the Terrans had no sense of proportion whatsoever.

The reasoning for the Xunvirian's weird formation became quickly apparent as the rest of their warships moved towards the flanks of the enemy, encircling the swarm and opening fire on it with all their energy weapons at the same time, dozens of beams criss-crossing the intervening empty space.

The screen struggled to reflect the amount of Terran casualties, the hundreds of ships that they were losing under the hell of combined laser fire the Xunvirians were unleashing upon them. It appeared the smaller Terran crafts weren't protected by any kind of shields. But still, the blob

didn't seem to thin, stoically enduring the assault without ever slowing its advance.

With a shiver, Daokat wondered if each of those small crafts was carrying a pilot. If so, retaining such level of discipline under the conditions they were being subjected to would speak volumes about the Terran mindset. Would they use some sort of brainwashing, conditioned training, drugs... were they some society built on honor and total obedience? On a complete negation of the individual needs for the good of the collective?

Somehow, he doubted they would be piloted. It was easier to refuse the idea that any sentient being would allow being subjected to that. But his memory reminded him that the swarm's target, the Xunvirian battleship that had been singled out by the Terrans and had submitted itself to its role as bait, was definitely piloted by a crew.

He muttered a curse. Daokat had always known there was something strangely horrifying about war, some kind of rational madness to it. But seeing it play out in front of him was quite a different beast than learning about it from the safety of a philosophical essay.

He saw as the Terran crafts finally reached their objective and began to slowly envelop the doomed battleship, and then things started happening very fast.

A white flash in the screen marked the disappearance of the targeted ship, along with a small chunk of the enemy swarm. A few instants later, seven more flashes followed, each at the position of a close Xunvirian vessel.

Nakstani pronounced the words *"Nuclear weapons."*

Daokat's mind raced to consider the diplomatic consequences of detonating thermonuclear ordinance in the orbit of an inhabited green world, in direct contravention of the most fundamental war treaties of the Galactic Federal Council. But he abandoned that train of thought as he saw the eight massive Terran *escorting* ships do something impossible.

All of a sudden, they shot out of the main blob at an astonishing speed, their acceleration so disproportionately high he wasn't sure how the ships' structures could even handle such extreme forces. Let alone how whatever crew was manning them hadn't just been instantly turned into paste.

Each of them was aiming towards one of the main Xunvirian battleships. The ones that had stood out of range of the swarm during the entire battle.

The ones that housed the fleet admirals and tactical command centers.

The Terran ships had crossed most of the empty space separating them from the battleships in just a couple of seconds. But they didn't stop. They just kept accelerating, homing in on their targets.

One instant too late, Daokat realized they didn't *intend* to stop. The Terrans were using their own ships as oversized battering rams. As missiles.

In his mind, that cinched it. The Terrans were lunatics. A berserk species that lacked any moral consideration towards the lives of even their own crews.

The Xunvirian battleships had too been caught by surprise at the strange maneuver. They fired their thrusters,

desperately trying to get out of the way, but they just couldn't match the maddening levels of acceleration of their Terran counterparts.

A moment later, Daokat stared in disbelief as the information representing the targeted vessels simply vanished from the screen.

Nakstani's terse voice interrupted the feed. "Daokat," she said, not bothering to sub-vocalize. "We are evacuating. Go to the spaceport, get into our ship and come pick me up here."

As if on cue, the rest of the Terran swarm *exploded*, small dots flying everywhere, towards each and one of the remaining Xunvirian ships.

Even towards the planet itself, Daokat noted as he reached for his travel bag and left the room, his heart beating fast.

The Xunvirian careful formation was in shambles. Amazingly, half of the Terran giant escort ships had survived their respective impacts and were coming in for a second pass. The defending fleet was disorganized, some ships turning to respond to this new menace, others trying to contain the rising tide of the swarm.

A series of white flashes followed, and more signal icons simply disappeared.

Nakstani's vid link started freezing and losing visual coherence, interferences continuously blocking the image and sound now.

Right, Daokat thought. All those nuclear explosions must have been bathing the planet in a storm of electromagnetic

pulses, and their communicators just weren't designed to operate under such conditions.

Scampering down the stairs he closed the video feed to save bandwidth, keeping the audio link still opened.

He looked back at the sky as soon as he exited the building. A mesmerizing green and red aurora covered the whole horizon, north to south. It was slowly spreading, dancing lazily far above the clouds.

Daokat ran towards the adjacent spaceport, dodging the locals who stood motionless all over the street looking at the sky. He didn't fault them, though. The sight was beautiful, in a horrifying kind of way.

He heard the sudden voice of his boss . "Daokat!" she all but screamed. "We... got to... and... !"

"Repeat that!" he said. "The link is cutting!"

"-said... warn... You m-... ship!"

Daokat eyed again the now turning purple sky. *What had she said? Something about the ship?*

He was now running past the large landing gear of the giant commercial freighters parked all over the place. His legs burned with the overexertion, each step sending pain through his whole body.

"Yes. I'm almost at the ship!" he screamed back into the communicator.

He could see his target. The Embassy ship. He rushed towards its boarding ramp, from where one of the support staff was signaling him to move faster. Nakstani had

probably contacted them too, because the vehicle's engines were already turned on, filling the air with their piercing noise, raising a cloud of dust and wind that tugged at Daokat's clothes and buffeted his exposed silvery skin.

"Nakstani," he said as he climbed the ramp and entered the vehicle, "we should try contacting the Terrans using the ship's quantum relay. Maybe we can still negotiate a truce, or stop them from shooting us down once we get up there!"

"I don't... listen... You need to warn the Council... a Type-G emerge-... It's an expo-...!"

Had she just said *Type-G emergency?*

Daokat moved towards the front of the ship, his steps muffled by the carpeted floors. He had to use his hands to grasp at the door handles and walls to keep his balance, as the spaceship was already starting its ascent.

"It's a what?" he asked.

"An ex-... -ator!"

The link died.

He was still trying to decipher Nakstani's words when he reached the ship's narrow cockpit. He all but climbed into the free seat next to the only pilot, a young female Difeniard whose attention was currently focused on manually operating the vehicle, her short brown coat of fur puffed up. Somehow, Daokat doubted this take-off was following proper procedures.

Nakstani had said to warn the Council.

A Type-G emergency.

Type-G: an event with the potential to cause grave loss of life and property across the entirety of the Galactic Federal Council and its associated states.

Type-Gs were an almost theoretical concept. Only one had ever been formally declared in the history of the Galactic Council, when an artificially engineered virus had spread across seven stellar systems, menacing to kill hundreds of millions. Declaring one here seemed excessive, even after witnessing the Terrans' actions.

So... what else had Nakstani seen?

Daokat engaged the ship's quantum relay from his console and started inputting his identification code.

He glanced out of the cockpit's windows as he waited for the link to establish. The ship was now skimming the roofs of the city's houses, moving towards the monolith of the Directorate building. He saw local Xunvirians in the streets turning to run towards nearby houses *-had the colonial authorities sounded the alarm?*. A few stopped to look at the passing vehicle, moving out of the way of the little tornado its engines were creating.

The console pinged, waiting for him to talk.

"This is Assistant Ambassador Daokat," he said. "Code three-seven-six-sphere, speaking on behalf of Ambassador Nakstani, code nine-three-nine-sphere. I'm declaring a Type-G emergency originating at the Xunvir Republic, Yovit system." He didn't miss the bewildered glance the pilot gave him.

The console pinged again. The message had been parsed by the automatic receiver. The link was redirecting.

Up above, there were dozens of white trail lines slowly criss-crossing the sky.

There was something, something else Nakstani had saw. What had she tried to say? An expo-, an expo-what?

And just then, he remembered something.

Terran.

That was what the Corvette Captain had said, back at the Empyrean Palace. Terran. Not *Terrans.*

One. Singular.

The Terran.

A voice came out of the console. "This is Permanent Security Dispatch speaking to Assistant Ambassador Daokat. Please confirm declaration of Type-G emergency."

"Type-G emergency confirmed," he replied. Concise and to the point. *Always be concise when speaking to Dispatch,* Nakstani had once told him.

"Describe it."

"The Xunvir Republic has been attacked by an exponential replicator, codenamed Terran. Replicator appears to be intelligent and of artificial nature, and does not respond to communication attempts. Replicator is already in control of three... -correction-, four stellar sys-..."

Light.

A deafening noise. A roaring shadow darkening it all. A fleeting moment of surprise as left became down and right

became up. Rolling. Crashing. A searing flash of pain crossing his mind.

Darkness.

Chapter 6

Their empty eyes stared at me.

Four eyes per body. Narrow eyes. Two in front, two to the sides.

My assault soldiers advanced along desolated landscapes, passing by the ruined skeletons of trees and collapsed buildings alike, their footsteps making crunchy noises as they stepped on terrain made uneven by the piles of rubble, debris and concrete scattered all over the ground.

I had squadrons marching through everyone of the planet's many small towns. Searching, scanning, sending their data to my main body in orbit. They were escorted from the air by a fleet of drones, flying through the thick gray clouds of radioactive dust that covered the entire world's atmosphere.

The Xunvirian bodies were not in underground refuges. In fact, I hadn't found any of those so far. No. They were in the open, scattered, having been flung around by the hurricane level winds created when I had simultaneously detonated my three thousand and seventy-one thermonuclear warheads all over the planet.

In parts of the main city, the destruction had been so severe that it was hard to distinguish what had once been a building or a wide avenue. I had to recur to the maps I had made previously from orbit to figure it out and direct my army towards the most useful locations.

All things considered, though, the damage I had dealt to this planet was still lower than the one the Xunvirians had unleashed against Earth. Albeit irradiated, this planet still had oceans, for once.

Or maybe it was a matter of time. If I had started a nuclear winter, maybe in a few years from now temperatures would come crashing down, causing the ocean water to freeze and recede. It was an interesting thought, one worth verifying, so I separated a few drones and set them to stay as permanent orbiting satellites, monitoring this world's future evolution.

A monument. I had once wanted to build a monument, to humanity.

It was important. I felt a deeply rooted urge to fight, to rebel against the idea of time ticking by, of the last memories of our species being left behind as the galaxy spun by. Of having been nothing, amounted to nothing but some irrelevant blip on someone else's history books.

Of being forgotten.

This... this destruction, this ruin... it was retribution, yes, it was vengeance. But it was so much more.

It was also remembrance.

It was our cry of pain, defiance and fury. A cry so high and strong that cities crumbled and worlds died under it. A shout that would linger in the air for centuries, even longer.

A shout that they couldn't help but listen to. That nobody could ever pretend not to have heard.

Yes. They would fear me for this. They would hate me, maybe even manage to kill me for it.

But they wouldn't ever *forget* it.

This, right here, it was a monument.

Here and there, some survivors would try to fight my robotic soldiers. Maybe a lone Xunvirian making a suicidal assault, maybe a group of them carrying out a better planned attack from the distance. They would shoot at the machines using energy handguns, or throw homemade explosives at them; and they would manage to disable or destroy a few.

But invariably, they would lose. They would be overwhelmed by the assault of the nearby robots, surprised that even an apparently downed soldier could still shoot back at them. Or they would be flanked by a second squad, one they couldn't have seen through the dusty fog that covered everything and limited visibility to a few yards, but whose approach I had no problem coordinating.

On some rare occasions, one of my drones equipped with energy weapons would be flying nearby, and I would have it take care of the offenders. They would go down as if struck by an angry god, a bolt of lighting coming out of the cloudy skies among a thunderous noise. I preferred it that way. It felt more efficient. More optimal.

I wasn't exactly sure how to feel about all this... this destruction. I had almost expected to be contented after I had brought some level of payback to the Xunvirians. Not happy, exactly, but satisfied.

Except I didn't feel like that. Not disappointed either, nor regretful. Just that detachment, that emotional indifference as I systematically erased the remaining menaces. As if I was crossing off the items in my task list, just something that *had* to be done, me being the appropriate -the only- person available for the job.

It was that stillness that annoyed me, that frustrated me to no end. Had I felt gleeful or regretful, it would have meant I was still human at some important level. But this, this lack of emotion I didn't know how to take it. Was it a normal, expected human response? Or was it a sign of my descent? Of my becoming something else.

All in all my casualties were low. Even when taking into account those robots that had fallen prey to the dangerous environment, with its shifting piles of rubble, sudden gas explosions and hidden pit holes.

When they weren't fighting, my soldiers shuffled through the remains looking for useful materials, artifacts, and working technology. This was a rare opportunity for me. Over the last weeks I had learnt much about the species I was fighting by examining the ships and facilities I had conquered. I had used that knowledge to come up with counters to their attacks and to develop new, more resistant armor, better propulsion and weapons...

But in a sense, my knowledge had still been limited. All I had ever had access to was their military ships and resource extraction outposts: a very narrow slice of a society.

Right here, now, I was learning about the Xunvirians as a community. Not only going through their barracks and ships, but also through their homes, markets, farms, factories, administrative buildings...

This painted a much richer picture of the enemy I was fighting, and my processing units raced to incorporate each piece of new information, to give it sense, contextualize and categorize it, and look for ways in which it could be put to use.

I discovered that their society was internally segregated, different buildings and homes sporting banners and identifying symbols of varying colors. I wasn't sure what that division represented, but maybe I would be able to exploit it in the future.

The spaceport and its large cargo starships told a story of logistics, of interstellar supply runs and resource distribution. A story that already had me shuffling objectives in my mind, reprioritizing possible targets to achieve the best strategy, the deepest impact in the Xunvir Republic's trade and military supply chains.

It was near the spaceport where I found it. A relatively small spaceship, lodged between two buildings as if it had fallen down from the sky. Its entire rear part was missing, the internal mechanisms, pipes and corridors all exposed to the dusty wind. But that wasn't what piqued my curiosity.

No, what piqued my curiosity was that it didn't look Xunvirian.

As a mass producer myself, I had begun to show some appreciation towards the Xunvirian's manufacturing techniques. Their spaceships appeared to be constructed by joining together a series of repeating smaller prefabricated modules, many of which were the same across all their different types of spacecrafts that made up their fleet. It was clever, bulk production of those modules would make costs much cheaper, and it probably allowed for easier orbital assembly of new ships.

It was also the reason Xunvirian space vehicles looked like an amalgamation of straight edges and odd angles, or the reason they had been so easy for my soldiers to board, many modules featuring more openings and vents that strictly

necessary in a warship, but that I guessed would come useful in other types of ship configurations.

But the downed craft in front of my soldiers, it didn't look anything like that. This one had been purposely built as a whole. Its aerodynamic shape had been designed to look good, to be elegant and stylized, rather than easy to build.

With the help of a drone, I had three of my soldiers climb into the vehicle through its gaping hole. They advanced along the dark corridors, using the infrared cameras to see in the darkness. The ship had rolled over, so they were walking on what I assumed was the corridor's ceiling. I maneuvered them slowly and with caution, making sure they wouldn't step on any ventilation grills or exposed pipes and wires.

The corridors' walls, I noticed, also lacked the perennial hieroglyphical motifs that I had learnt to associate to Xunvirian decoration. No, these ones were surprisingly minimalistic, with nothing but some very simple line designs etched here and there. It reaffirmed my first impression that this ship wasn't local.

I was already cataloging the most interesting pieces of technology to recover from the fallen ship. Sadly, the thrusters, warp drive, and shield projector were all missing; I assumed I would find them wherever the rear end of the vehicle had ended up, if it even existed anymore. But there were still many other devices I wanted to look into, such as the intricate quantum relay communicator, which appeared to be of a more advanced design than the ones I was currently using. I had two of the soldiers start to disassemble it while the other kept exploring the craft, moving towards the front.

That was when I found the two creatures, huddled in what I assumed was the ship's cockpit.

One reminded me of a short-snouted fox. Covered in brown fur and with large pointy ears, although without any tail that I could see. It was sitting in the corner further away from my soldier, hunched over with pain. It looked like it was gravely hurt, its clothes covered in blood, yet it was conscious.

The other I immediately classified as a male. An humanoid of smooth silvery skin and graceful lines. He stood right between my soldier and the other hurt alien, aiming an energy handgun at the robot's head. He didn't look like he had ever been in a firefight, though, his aim wavering and his body twitchy. But that could also be a result of his injuries. His face sported a red gash, and his left arm hung useless, covered in blood.

I had my soldier stop, and considered my options while the silver creature pronounced words in a language I didn't understand. I could order the robot to attack, of course. The alien would shoot at its head, but that wouldn't incapacitate the machine, only destroy its cameras. The radio transmitter and control unit were both in the chest area, so even when blind I could still get it to charge at the creatures and use its arms to tear them apart. This was something many Xunvirian troops had learnt the hard way.

I had the other two robots in the ship to stop their salvaging and move towards the cockpit. I could just have them enter guns blazing. The alien might be able to down one of the soldiers if he was fast, but that would be it.

Or maybe I could use a drone, order one of the flying machines to shoot or crash into the downed ship. It would destroy the whole cockpit section, erase the problem. A bit

too excessive, perhaps, and it risked damaging the components I wanted to retrieve.

But there was something more, I noted. I didn't *want* to kill them. Oh, I wanted them to be *gone*, I wanted them to have died in the crash, maybe. It was the idea of shooting them that irked me.

Deep down, I had always known that going down this path, that engaging in this revenge, risked turning me into something else. That if the stars were the place where monsters lived, it would be so easy to become one of them, now that I myself was living in that same endless void.

And looking at the ruined planet, perhaps I had already crossed that line.

But there had been a reason for that. I hadn't started this war, the Xunvirians had. I was merely taking it to their turf. Bringing them the same level of destruction, the same level of pain they had previously unleashed upon us. On humanity. It felt righteous, like I was working towards some sort of balance, some sort of state of equilibrium, the same way the laws of physics did. Action and reaction.

This, though? Shooting -... no, executing- these aliens I knew nothing about would feel awfully close to *starting* a new conflict. A new war. I would be the aggressor here, even if I suspected that they were collaborating with the Xunvirians, giving them their support and technology.

Should I treat them as the enemies they probably were, or give peace a chance?

I could capture them, instead. Wasn't that what many armies had done to suspected spies in the past? I would need to build a suitable habitat for them, of course. Maybe a custom

transport ship to house the creatures. But that would be easy. I would then be able to interrogate them, use their knowledge in my favor.

But again, that felt awfully close to an act of aggression. A lesser one, true, but still unwarranted if they happened to be innocent and just be in the wrong place, at the wrong time.

Besides, something about taking prisoners felt wrong. I didn't really *need* them. I could retrieve any information I wanted about their technology from the devices I had found and the ship itself. In fact, I guessed interrogating them on engineering specifics would be an arduous, useless task that wouldn't give me any new information that I couldn't gather through reverse engineering. And I just didn't care about their alien politics and intrigues.

No, capturing them would only be a delaying tactic. It didn't solve the fundamental decision I had to make. Whether to consider them enemies, or not. If they were enemies, then I would kill them. If they weren't, then the right action was to let them go.

I almost wished the silvery creature would open fire, resolving my inner conflict, declaring openly his secret allegiance. *Then* I would be justified. *Then* I would be perfectly fine with my machines butchering them.

But of course, he didn't. He just stood there, spewing words, words, words. Alien words in languages I didn't understand, like some sort of auditory mirroring of the radio messages the Xunvirian ships often bathed me with.

Annoying.

The thing was, I hadn't given that much thought at what would happen *after*. After the war ended. After the

Xunvirians were done with. After my main purpose had been achieved, one way or the other.

Somehow, a part of me suspected that there wouldn't be any *after*. That achieving that objective, getting to that end goal might end up requiring a complete sacrifice.

But what if I was wrong? What if there was a light at the end of the tunnel, if somehow I could come out of this trail having reached some sort of balance, of inner peace... then what? Maybe I could try my best at restoring humanity. I hadn't really thought about that.

But if that was the case then I would have to live, somehow, in this galaxy. With these other species. Unless I wanted to start a war against the entire universe.

They would see me as an aberration, no doubt. A freakish mechanical horror. And I would always look at them with suspicion, knowing they had tacitly supported the ones who killed humanity. That they had enabled our destruction, even if it had been just through their passivity.

But wasn't that human, too? Giving them the benefit of the doubt? Trying to find some common ground?

I didn't know. Truth was, I wanted to hurt them, I wanted them to feel their share of pain. And yet so far, I had no actual *reason* to justify that, other than my own suspicions.

In the end, I guessed I had no choice. If I truly believed in justice above all, if I truly believed that my own cause was right, then I had to consider them innocent. Until proven guilty.

An olive branch, then.

Slowly, I had my soldiers drop their weapons to the floor. It was symbolic, of course. A mere non verbal message. If the alien decided to attack, I wouldn't really need the guns to put him down.

The creature's eyes did a weird sort of blink, his surprise evident even to me. But he seemed to pick up on my intent, and hesitantly placed his own handgun down.

I ordered my left-most soldier to enter the cockpit and approach the fallen fox-thing, its movements slow and deliberate, each motion telegraphed so as to not scare the aliens. The silvery one eyed the machine warily, but didn't try to stop it.

I had the robot offer a hand to the hurt creature, which looked surprised from the hand to the machine's faceplate and back to the hand. It asked something to its partner, which seemed to reply in the affirmative. Then, the creature grasped my hand.

Strange, to feel that sort of contact again, one that I had almost forgotten about, even if it was though the very limited tactile sensors of my assault robot's hands.

I helped it stand up straight. The creature let out a groan, and the silvery alien started moving towards the gun. For an instant, it looked like this tentative truce we had managed to establish was going to come crashing down. But then, the brown alien said something and its partner visibly relaxed.

My robot started walking towards the cockpit's exit, half-carrying the hobbling creature along the way. The other alien eyed the gun again in indecision, but then followed them leaving it behind. I had my two other soldiers take the group's rear.

Getting the pair of aliens out of the crashed ship was a complex operation that took the longest part of an hour and involved a chain of assault soldiers working in conjunction, along with the support of three of my flying drones. At points, I was worried the hurt creature wouldn't make it, its fur covered in bright blood. I had a couple of robot squads go through the local area, looking for whatever passed as first aid supplies for the Xunvirians.

When I finally got them out of the wreckage and into the open, the silvery alien looked shocked. He stared around at the devastated landscape in silence, then pushed my closest soldier in the chest while screaming some unknown word over and over again.

My soldier didn't budge. I wanted to say something, even though I wasn't sure of what, but I realized I hadn't designed my assault army with the capacity for speech in mind. I had never intended to negotiate with the Xunvir Republic after all. So the machines just stared at him in silence. Frozen. Eventually, he shook his head in a very human looking sign of defeat, and walked up to his partner.

I had a drone land next to them and drop the medical supplies I had managed to scavenge. This was as far as I could go. I wasn't a medic, didn't know anything about the aliens' physiology or how to heal their wounds. Surprisingly, the silvery one looked as confused as I was. But the fox-thing seemed more knowledgeable in first aid and started giving out instructions to its partner, who set out to work, cleaning the wounds, applying some sort of gels on them, and wrapping them in bandages.

Two of my soldiers watched the procedure with interest, relaying the images to me so that I could file them in my memory databanks and go through them later, if I ever was

put in the position to perform first aid on a fox-looking alien again.

Meanwhile, I had my troops clear out and secure a corridor from the crashed ship all the way to the remains of the spaceport, killing the small group of Xunvirians that were trying to set an ambush out of a nearby building.

I knew there was no point in saving the creatures just to abandon them to their own luck in this irradiated, ruined world. They wouldn't survive for long, not in their condition.

No, if this was my attempt at not fighting the other civilizations, at shooting for some sort of coexistence, it would make no sense unless the rescued creatures could escape, survive long enough to get back to their respective homes and deliver that message for me.

I had started working on that particular issue even before I had managed to extract them out their downed craft. If they were to leave the planet, they would need a vehicle.

I knew my own drones weren't up to the task. Even though many had carrying compartments of their own where they could transport materials, salvaged artifacts, assault soldiers, or nuclear warheads when the occasion required it, they just didn't have any sort of life support system on board.

I could always manufacture new types of drones. A new design able to transport living beings, and I might end up constructing a few of them in the future, just in case this situation presented itself again.

But for the time being, I had figured out a faster way.

Most -if not all- the Xunvirian ships parked at the spaceport had been damaged, yes. But they hadn't all been damaged in the same places. And the modules they were built from had originally been designed to be interchangeable.

So I had set out to assemble my very own Xunvirian vessel out of the surviving pieces from three other different ships. It wasn't as easy as it sounded, though. Even the surviving modules had damages of their own, with bent pipes and burnt surfaces all over them.

I was using a relatively small patrol ship as the main chassis, since it had survived relatively intact and only needed some of its main components replaced. A fleet of drones was working on it, welding beams together, rebuilding its life support system, and attaching a new power plant and engine block that I had extracted from nearby freight transport crafts.

Too much work for saving these two creatures, who hadn't done anything for me, who were probably friends with my enemy? Perhaps.

But that olive branch I had wanted to offer? It had to be delivered.

When the medical treatment was over, I set them to move. It took some gentle pushing for them to get the message, and one of my robots had to carry the hurt one bridal style. The silvery alien startled at first when that happened, but after a few words from his companion he allowed it, even though he kept stealing glances at the carrying unit from time to time.

The procession advanced slowly. It had to. While my assault troops had the infrared channel of their cameras, and access to the detailed terrain scans my scanning flying drones had created with their radar sensors, the aliens relied entirely on

their own eyes and were victims to the limited visibility. I also didn't want to risk the group falling into some unseen pit, so I had them follow a winding path that made wide detours around some of the most unstable areas in the ruined city.

It took them almost three hours to reach the spaceport, and by that time the impromptu spaceship I had assembled was ready to fly. Or so I hoped. There was always the risk it would just explode on ignition, with these things. But I doubted it.

When the creatures saw the contraption for the first time, they stood frozen, exchanging words in their own language.

What? Did that mean they didn't like it? True, it wasn't my greatest design, but I was proud of what I had managed to build in such a short notice.

The male turned to look at me, at one of the soldiers. He said something and waited, maybe expecting some kind of response.

I had the machine point at them, the spaceship, and the sky in quick succession. He said a word, and his head bobbed slightly. Was that a nod? Something else entirely?

The robot repeated the sequence of hand signs. Them. Ship. Sky. Them. Ship. sky.

This time the alien didn't say anything. He just helped the injured creature get into the ship. After a few minutes of waiting, the vehicle's engines started and the craft began moving.

Well. It hadn't exploded, at least.

I watched the vehicle from a safe distance with my drones. It didn't leave the planet straight away, as I had anticipated. Instead it flew over the ruined city, making lazy circles around a particular set of ruins, as if searching for something.

Curious, I consulted the map I had made from orbit. It was the place where one of the city's largest buildings had stood. Some sort of administrative facility, I guessed.

Were they looking for some artifact? Some critical weapon to use against me that they had kept in there?

I didn't know, but whatever it was, I didn't think it would be a good move to let them have it. I thought I had been generous enough so far.

I sent a couple of my drones and had them fly in formation, one to each side of their ship, forcing them to stay in course if they didn't want to crash into one of them. The aliens seemed to get the message and abandoned their search, accelerating to leave the planet.

For a fleeting moment, I considered shooting them down. It would be easy... just have one of the drones' vector thrusters align fifteen degrees off-course. The drone would crash into the ship's engine section, probably disintegrating the craft right away from the impact. Or, if it survived somehow, then they both would die when their vehicle crashed into the ground a couple of minutes later.

So easy. It would only require a thought.

All this time I had been helping them, I had been working within the safety of knowing that my decision was reversible. That should I change my mind, I would have no problem killing them at any moment I chose.

Up until this moment. This was the point of no return. If I left them leave now, I wouldn't have anyway to retract that decision. I would be committing to it, to that vague and dangerous idea of coexistence.

I didn't do anything, and watched with ten thousand eyes as their ship engaged its warp drive and slipped out of normal space. Out of my reach.

An olive branch.

I wasn't a monster. Not yet. Maybe.

In the planet below, the Xunvirian's empty eyes withheld their own judgment on that.

With a mental shrug, I started the preparations for my next move. I recalled some of the machines, left others on the ground with updated orders. Started spooling my own warp drive, my mind already considering how to approach the next battle, what reinforcements I needed to manufacture...

Which system I would attack next.

Chapter 7

Time in warp was, Daokat thought, a time for reflection. A time spent in transition, in that ephemeral threshold between the different worlds, the different cultures, places and moments that defined his life.

He was now sitting in a small, cold room that he guessed would normally serve as both a canteen and some sort of common area. The austere steel tables and chairs meant to fold into the walls, clearing an empty space in which to meet and play whatever games Xunvirian ship crews played to pass time when in space.

He almost wished there was a window in the room. Nothing fancy, just a small porthole from which to see the great beyond. But he knew there wasn't really anything out there to see when in warp. Just a dark, endless expanse, not even the star lights reaching the ship inside its little bubble of distorted space.

Time in warp was not, by any means, a time Daokat would call *important*. It wasn't decisive or memorable on its own. Time in warp wasn't when things *happened*. No, it was that short vacation, those few minutes or hours in which being disconnected, inaccessible, was not only justified but expected. In which he could be alone with his thoughts, taking a respite from the trials and tribulations the rest of the universe went through.

But though Daokat wouldn't call this time *important*, he still thought of it as *necessary*. This, he knew, was the time that existed in between a chapter had ended and the next hadn't quite yet begun. The time when to take stock of your life so far, let go of regrets, learn from mistakes, and get ready for that inevitable next episode. That slightly changed universe that would be waiting for him whenever he returned to normal space.

And Daokat had a lot to take stock of.

Last time he had had that much to think about, to reflect upon, was when he had left his home world of Sanksia to report to his new post at the very edge of the galaxy, under the orders of one Ambassador Nakstani. He had been enraged, spending most of his travel time secluded in his cabin, feeling either resentful at the Council, or sorry at himself and his doomed career.

Fitting, that now it was that very same chapter the one coming to an end. His time in Xunvir, his time learning about the Republic's culture and customs, touring their major worlds, living in the capital and socializing with the elites that visited the Empyrean Palace.

His time with Nakstani.

They had searched for her, of course. They had flown over the ruins of the Directorate building she had been in when the city was devastated. Daokat had tried to contact through her communicator, hoping that somehow she would have survived the destruction like he himself had. That she might have had time to take refuge somewhere safe before the nuclear devices had gone off.

Of course, he had known all along it would be a fruitless task. But they had persevered, clinging to that one hope,

that one in a million chance, up until the Terran had not so subtly forced them to abandon the search.

And so it was time to confront the truth: Nakstani was gone.

Which meant Daokat was now left to face this changed universe on his own. This galaxy that was spiraling fast into the unknown, into a conflict of unforeseeable proportions.

The destruction of the colony had been so fast and thorough that it was difficult to comprehend. The first time he had seen the ruined landscape from up above, as they were leaving the planet in the ship the Terran had provided them with, his mind had gone back to what he had learnt during the previous days with the Commissary of Agriculture.

He had started wondering about the cost of rebuilding those plantations. What techniques would the Xunvirians follow to clean the soil and get it rid of radiation, or how they would go about reprocessing the atmosphere, clearing the dust the continent-wide fires were raising and turning it back into a safe, breathable composition.

And the more he thought about it, the more he went back to his recently acquired knowledge on colonial agricultural practices, the more he realized how hopeless that task would be.

No, the damage was just too extensive, the wounds to deep to be healed. It wouldn't be worth it, from an economical standpoint. Not even to a healthy Republic, let alone one embroiled in a total war. It would be cheaper to start over someplace new than to try and bring the dead world back to life.

To all effects, the colony of Yovit was dead. The planet would be abandoned, having lost its habitability ranking in a

matter of minutes.

He sighed, reaching for one more small salted cookie-like thing out of the box he had found in one of the room's many cabinets. He didn't feel like eating, but Telzhira -the pilot- had suggested he should regain some of his lost strength.

The intensity of the attack, the sheer scale of it, how out of proportion it had been... it was puzzling. As if the Terran had not only wanted to defeat the Xunvirians, but to utterly crush them. To tear down everything they had built, to ruin their future and meticulously extinguish their hopes.

If the Xunvirians had been attacked by a civilization of sentient beings, it would speak of a burning hatred, Daokat thought. But trying to figure out the Terran's motivations was... difficult. It could indeed be anger, or it could as easily be just the results of a misfiring algorithm. A rogue artificial intelligence bent on emotionless cleansing and destruction just because of a mishap in its programming.

And wasn't that exactly why the development of self-sustaining artificial minds was forbidden by the Council, he thought.

At first, when Daokat had woken up alive in the Embassy's ship cockpit, he had hated the thing. Hated the senseless death it was unleashing upon the Xunvirians, and cursed whatever civilization had created such monstrosity and unleashed it upon the cosmos. For a second there, he had hoped that whatever species had built the Terran, they had been the first victims of their own cruel creation.

And just then, the cursed thing had gone and saved his and the pilot's lives, going so far as to provide them with medicine, first-aid kits, and a working spaceship in which to escape the doomed planet.

So... what had been all that about, then? Was the Terran sentient, after all? Had it taken pity on them and allowed them to live?

Or maybe it was just a fluke of luck. Perhaps the presence of other species had triggered some edge condition in its programming, compelling the machine to help them. In that case, the Terran letting them go would be as emotionless as it butchering the Xunvirians. Just a computer doing its mindless work.

But Daokat hoped that it was the former. That those actions spoke of some level of compassion, of regret, buried within. Of some kind of sentience existing inside the machine, faint as it was. Because that would mean there was still room to understanding, to communication, to...

"Daokat," the voice of Telzhira coming out of the room's speaker brought him back to the present. "We have just left warp for our first scheduled stop, and I've established a link with the Council. They want to speak to you."

Daokat sighed. Time in warp was, by necessity, always too short. It had to be. Too short to really matter, too short to become a chapter on its own. The ebbs and flows of the universe always catching up to him in the end. Always sooner than he expected.

He left his cabin and walked through the bare metallic corridors towards the ship's command room. The vehicle the Terran had constructed was, to put it simply, *odd.* Almost surrealist at places, like if he was caught in some sort of dreamlike interpretation of a Xunvirian spaceship. It had corridors that led nowhere and culminated in dead ends, rooms with no discernible purposes, sections without any illumination whatsoever while others were so bright it hurt

his eyes. He had soon learnt not to follow the signs and arrows painted on the corridors' walls, since they could as easily guide him to his destination as have him walk in circles in search of a room that didn't even exist in the first place.

It even had two separate computers rather than one, each independently handling different aspects of the ship's operation. Telzhira had grumbled at length about that particular point.

He joined the pilot in the oversized command room and took the seat by her side. Telzhira had took a beating during the crash, at it showed. Her fur was dirty, with patches of crusty blood here and there where the bandages didn't cover her body. She still had difficulty walking and breathing, but Daokat hoped she would recover.

He himself had broken his left arm and got a cut across his face that would probably leave a scar unless treated soon, with a skin regenerator preferably. But none of his injuries were as serious or extensive as the Difeniard's.

Upon seeing Daokat, she pressed some icon in her console, then gave him a quick nod.

"This is Assistant Ambassador Daokat," he said. His voice sounded even more tired than he felt. How many hours had he stayed awake for by now? It felt like his visit to the oxygenic tree plantation this morning had happened a lifetime ago. "Code three-seven-six-sphere. I'm the highest surviving officer from the diplomatic mission to the Xunvir Republic, after Ambassador Nakstani went missing in action... presumed dead."

"Daokat," he immediately recognized the frosty voice coming out of the speakers. "What is your status?"

Like anyone working for a Council Embassy, he was familiar with the voice of Lexiwe-the-Zakarnine, Grand Minister for Foreign Affairs and Diplomacy of the Galactic Federal Council. They had even been in the same room once, almost three years ago. Along with some five hundred other people.

So yes, Daokat didn't need any sort of caller identification to know he was talking to the person responsible for the peace treaty that had ended the Tawarian Independence Conflict, to one of the co-signatories of the Fifth Accords.

What he had never expected is hearing his own name pronounced in the-Zakarnine's sharp, icy fricative voice, the initial 'D' almost turned into a 'Th'. *Thaokat.*

And... he had been asked to report his status, he realized. Better not to keep a Grand Minister waiting.

"I... Pilot Telzhira and I have escaped the colony of Yovit and are on our way to the Xunvir capital... Sir."

"Are you two the only survivors from the diplomatic mission?"

"We have some support staff in the capital, but yes," Daokat replied. "As far as I know we are the only ones who made it out of Yovit... Did my message to Dispatch go through?"

"It did. The Galactic Federal Council declared a Type-G emergency three days ago and all its allied fleets are mobilizing to come to the defense of the Xunvir Republic."

Three days... It was always hard to account for the effects of time dilation. The attack on Yovit felt very recent to him, but it would be old news by now to the rest of the Council.

"How did you manage to escape?" asked the Grand Minister.

"The Terran, it just... it simply let us go and gave us a spaceship."

A silence.

"I see. You do understand how that might be interpreted by the Xunvirians."

"Yes I do, Sir," Daokat replied. "But... I've been thinking about this. Nakstani believed the Republic was hiding something from us relating to the Terran, and after seeing how it's singling out the Xunvirians but let my pilot and me go free, I have to agree. The Republic is more involved in the Terran's origins than they're letting on."

"That's a given. They have admitted to knowing the replicator's language, for once, and agreed to give us a language cipher. But the question in everyone's minds around here is: do you think the Republic actually built this thing?"

A cipher, Daokat thought. He would have paid to have that back in Yovit, when he had encountered the Terran. He had felt like an idiot trying to talk to its expressionless machines.

But he focused on the-Zakarnine's question. Could the Republic have built such a thing?

"No..." he replied at last. "I'm not sure that fits with what we know of them, and the Terran's machines don't look Xunvirian in the least, not to mention its robotic troops... No, I'm more of the belief that the Xunvirians found it inert somewhere and activated it. Maybe by mistake. Maybe they did something to provoke it. It would explain why it's only aggressive towards them. But in any case, I'm starting to think the Terran might be sentient enough that negotiation is a possibility."

"Why? Did it speak to you?"

"No..." Daokat said. He believed he had caught a glimpse of something, but now he wasn't sure of how to put it in words. Much less in words that the-Zakarnine would find worthy of consideration. "Not exactly, though there was some non verbal communication."

"The Xunvirians claim the replicator is ignoring their communication attempts, even those made using the Terran's language. You yourself said the same thing in your message. Are you retracting on that?"

"No Sir. I know I said that, but it could be different if it's the Council that is talking to it, rather than the Xunvir Republic. I'm just saying that there might still be some room for achieving a peaceful resolution."

"I see. I'll pass that up to High Governance. We believe the replicator's next target is likely to be the industrial world of Anacax-Farvin. Our fleets are moving in to defend it, so if there's an encounter we might try to communicate, though it's not in the planned course of action."

Anacax-Farvin. Daokat had been there before. It was a small, arid world administrated by the Anacax tribe. With a massive industrial output, entire regions of the planet devoted to manufacturing and covered in kilometers-long factories, Anacax-Farvin was the undisputed core of the Republic's economy and the source of the Anacax tribe's enormous political clout. It produced everything ranging from clothes and entertainment screens, to battleships and quantum relays. If the capital world of Xunvir was the brain and heart of the Republic, Anacax-Farvin was its muscles.

But his thoughts went back to the last sentence the Grand Minister had said. *Not in the planned course of action.*

"Why? Why not give talking a chance," Daokat said, "if we might get the Terran to refrain from further attacks?"

"I am already pushing for that, Daokat. But the ultimate decision belongs to High Governance."

He tried to think like Nakstani had taught him. Ignoring the-Zakarnine's rank. Reading between the lines of what he was *truly* saying. Why would High Governance decide to attack rather than negotiate with the Terran? Because...

"They've got a weapon," Daokat ventured. "Something they think can destroy the Terran."

"Correct. The scenario of an overwhelming attack fleet governed by an out of control artificial intelligence has been theorized before, and countermeasures were developed in case such a situation ever arose. High Governance believes these countermeasures can trump the replicator's..."

"They've got a weapon and they want to test it," Daokat interrupted, almost laughing. "Even if that means sacrificing our only chance at a negotiated peace!"

"It's not that easy, Assistant Ambassador," Daokat could detect a hint of irritation at being interrupted in the Grand Minister's voice. "The effectiveness of this countermeasure is situational. If the replicator keeps growing strong it might pass its point of usefulness, becoming immune to it. We simply can't allow the Terran to get too powerful to stop while we negotiate a theoretical peace deal."

He understood the reasoning, but still didn't like it. Not only because of the risk of losing the opportunity to talk to the Terran, but also... It was strange, but he felt oddly in debt to the cursed thing. As if he had to repay it from saving their

lives, even though it had been the Terran's own actions that had put them in danger in the first place.

Was that intentional? Was the Terran playing on that sense of reciprocity most sapient species had in order to make them second guess their actions, pit them against each other?

Or was that glimpse of *something* Daokat thought he had seen... real? Was the Terran capable of empathy?

"So you're advocating shooting first," Daokat said. "But with all due respect, if it's sentient, we can't just kill it without..."

"If the Terran is sentient, it's still guilty of an attempted genocide," the Grand Minister said. "We are not the ones shooting first here, Assistant Ambassador, and you know that. I *will* do my best to ensure a communication attempt happens. But if we don't reach an agreement, or if the Terran tries to attack the Xunvirians again, we will destroy it. There are seven hundred million inhabitants in Anacax-Farvin. We can't allow a repeat there of the same level of destruction seen in Yovit or Thalemit."

"Thalemit?"

"The colony world of Thalemit was attacked sixteen hours ago. Estimates range from one to two hundred thousand casualties. Luckily, overall damage was not as extensive as in Yovit's case."

Daokat closed his eyes hard, repressing a sudden urge to scream his frustration.

"I..." he said at last. "I know how it sounds, Sir. How the idea of a negotiated peace feels wrong after so many have died. But if we launch our weapon and it fails..."

"Then the replicator will consider us enemies too, and we will have lost our chance at a peaceful resolution, I know," said the-Zakarnine. "There's not an easy answer, Daokat. But in any case, this is out of your hands now. I need you back in Xunvir to act as liaison with the Republic's government."

"Right," Daokat said. "And to snoop around until I can learn what it is they're still hiding from us."

The Grand Minister let out an amused chuckle. "I see Nakstani has taught you well... Oh, and in that regards, I don't think it would be wise to make a leadership change to the diplomatic mission during a developing crisis..."

Translation: Nobody I asked wanted to even come close to that part of the galaxy.

"... and given that you already have extensive knowledge over the Xunvirian culture and contacts in their government, recalling you at this time would be counterproductive..."

Translation: Nobody important will care if you die.

"... so I believe it would be best if you took command of the mission as Acting Ambassador, until such time as..."

Translation: The job is yours, but I'm not making it official yet, in case things go wrong and I need a scapegoat.

"Thanks, Sir," Daokat said. "I'll set immediate course towards the Xunvir capital, and meet with the Emperor at the Empyrean Palace. I'll try to find out what they know."

"Sounds good to me. And Daokat... sorry about Nakstani."

"Right. Thank you, Grand Minister."

The link closed, and Daokat closed his eyes, breathing deep.

"To Xunvir, then?" asked the pilot.

He nodded. "How long will it take?"

She played with the icons and numbers in her console screen. "Thirty-seven point one subjective minutes. About fifty hours in referential time."

Fifty hours. By the time they emerged back into normal space, the situation around Anacax-Farvin would probably be resolved already. But for them two, only half an hour would have passed.

He nodded again and closed his eyes, not bothering to go back to the canteen for this leg of the trip. Maybe he could get some sleep instead.

Time in warp, Daokat concluded, was an *annoying* thing.

Chapter 8

Numbers.

War, I was realizing, was about numbers. About logistics.

The more I thought about it, the more I examined the information I had gained from the spaceports in the worlds I conquered, the shipping manifests and flight plans, the contents of downed cargo vessels... the more I realized it was true.

It felt somehow wrong, to put logistics in front of critical topics such as military tactics and strategies, intelligence gathering and attack formations. The word itself, *logistics*, sounded dry and machine-like. A word belonging to the quarterly finance report of a gray corporation, one of those where workers wore uniforms and accountants ruled from behind cryptic ledgers. A word that felt out of place in a battlefield, almost like an affront, a slap in the face of humanity's long history of military leaders and their genius maneuvers.

And yet, it was true.

At first, when I left Earth, I had considered myself one of those leaders. A general in command of an army of drones, recurring to subterfuge and clever tactics to best my enemies. The trap I had laid in the asteroid belt was a good example of that. I was carrying the torch, following the steps of Sun Tzu and Alexander. Honoring their past achievements

by keeping our military ingenuity alive, even if humanity itself had perished.

And for a time, it had worked. But the more I expanded, the larger my army grew, the less I could keep seeing myself as a military commander.

No, I wasn't just the leader, just the commander. I was the state in its entirety, the whole *nation*. I was the generals, yes, but also the soldiers. I was the workers back home. I was the factories and troop transports. I was the truck drivers delivering loads of ammunition to the front lines, and the miners extracting raw resources. I was the dead bodies, and the young men training to replace them.

I was the system, the supply chains, the economy itself. A well-oiled, self-improving war machine continuously pushed to its working limit.

The moment I began thinking like that, I started seeing the underlying patterns. The dependencies between my different factories, drones and ships. The hidden relationships of supply and demand. The unbalances and inefficiencies I could fix. My fleets of drones weren't armies. Not really. They were numbers. Quantifiable, discrete measurements. A positive to the Xunvirian's negative.

War was about numbers.

Odd then, that I had never been good at numbers. That I had always struggled with algebra and calculus, with the statistics course I had needed to take in college. I remembered failing to grasp the abstract concepts, asking for help to my classmates when I got stuck with the exercises I had been assigned.

Or had I? It was strange. As clear as my memory of failing in the course was, I also remembered teaching those very same concepts to my partners during my time at the institute. Did I become better at it after college? I cursed again my fragmented, blurry memories.

In any case, it all came natural to me now. It was easy, to maximize the function that represented how many more assault soldiers I could produce in the time gained by removing one of the outer plate covers in their design, and whether that gain would compensate the increased losses due to enemy fire. To optimize the drone swarming patterns as to reduce their total fuel consumption.

Or to figure out where to attack the Xunvir Republic to create the greatest amount of damage. What node in their own economic and supply system was the most critical, the most vulnerable.

Take the planet in front of me, for example.

It wasn't beautiful, not really. Yes, it could support life, had an atmosphere and clouds and liquid water. But it lacked that singular touch, those vibrant colors, that... liveliness that Earth once had. The same one the colonies I had destroyed had also shared.

No, the planet in front of me was dull in comparison. Its scarce clouds weren't puffy white but washed out gray and brown. Its seas were not aquamarine but murky, unappetizing. It didn't have those same green, lush forests and endless grass plains from those other worlds.

Even its very location worked against it. It orbited a gas giant -which made it a moon, technically-, the massive ball of turquoise clouds and its concentric rings stealing all the

attention, all the spectacle. Compared to that majesty, the small dull planet floating by was easy to ignore. Irrelevant.

Except it was anything but.

Looking into the lower part of the EM spectrum revealed the truth. There, the planet *shone*. I could see the grid-like patterns of its extensive factories and the myriad transportation networks linking them together. The hundreds of kilometers-wide spaceports dotting its surface. The buried power conduits, energy flowing through them like blood through veins, giving life to manufacturing complexes and refineries the size of cities. The planet was immersed in a sea of radio transmissions, electromagnetic waves emanating from its surface like petals from a blooming flower.

There were orbital assembly yards with both cargo freighters and warships still mid-construction. An almost continuous trail of spaceships entering and leaving its atmosphere, carrying goods and people, following the space lanes that would take them to the nearby systems or to the mineral processing outposts scattered throughout the gas giant's rings.

No. The planet in front of me was anything but dull. It was one of those critical nodes. A junction, a crossroads of sorts, in the supply and production chains of the Xunvir Republic.

Destroying it, taking it out, would be like removing the keystone from an arch. Halted production lines, entire pivotal industries vanishing and dying, lack of goods and transportation, scarcity... chaos.

If I managed to win here, then I could just sit down and watch as the Xunvir Republic fragmented and crumbled under its own weight, reverting from an interstellar

civilization back into a series of smaller, independent planetary nations.

Which was the reason I was currently approaching the planet, along with thirty-nine of my support ships, an attack swarm one million four hundred thousand units strong, and carrying more than one hundred thousand thermonuclear warheads.

Of course, it wouldn't be that easy.

The Xunvirian fleet guarding the planet, I had expected. It was composed of the ragged remains of their navy, huddled together and without any pretense at organized battle formations. It had both the ships that had survived the previous encounters, and those that had stayed in the rearguard. Destroyers in need of repairs, old battleships that should had been decommissioned but had received a last minute makeover instead, and modern cruisers straight out of the assembly line, their hulls still bare and without any paint coating.

Them, I had expected.

It was the other fleet, the one that was almost seven times as large as the Xunvirian's, that looked like a mismatched congregation of warships of all origins and colors -some flashy and elegant, others curved and bulbous; some narrow and agile, others powerful and sturdy-, the one whose ships' flanks were turned towards me, that blocked my path of advance towards both the planet and the Xunvirian fleet...

That one, I hadn't expected.

The sight was imposing; it was meant to be. So many enemies, so many species, so much destructive power gathered against me. Their missile batteries, their hundreds

of energy beams projectors all aimed at either my support crafts or my own body... It was a message that required no words, a communication beyond language, the kind that could be found in the African savanna when two predators faced each other over a downed corpse.

Which, of course, reminded me that the African savanna did no longer exist. If I had any doubts, any uncertainty, they vanished.

I kept my approach.

With a thought, I released my swarm of drones, setting it to swirl around my body and the neighboring support ships, blanketing us like a protective, shifting shield.

This time the message, the radio signal, didn't come out of the Xunvirian fleet. It was the newcomers who talked. And they didn't send their communication in dozens of languages, didn't repeat it. It was delivered only once, in English.

"Hostile approaching fleet, codenamed as *Terran*. This is a message from the Galactic Federal Council. The Xunvir Republic and the planet of Anacax-Farvin is under our protection. Cease immediately your approach or you will be destroyed. This is the only warning you will receive."

The word irked me. *Terran.* As if the only relevant thing about me, the only connection I still had with my origins was being from Earth. As if I wasn't worthy of being called *Human* anymore.

But I pushed that thought aside as I considered the situation, the fact that this Galactic Council was siding with the Xunvirians, and that they knew of my origins. How much

else did they know? Were they aware of my nature? Did they know what the Xunvirians had done to Earth?

Or maybe... had they themselves been complicit in the destruction of my species?

A sickening thought crossed my mind as I remembered the two aliens I had let go. Had they gone running back to their homeworlds, crying about the big bad monster rampaging through the Xunvirians' territories? Was the presence of this fleet here my own fault? Something that I could have avoided had I just gunned down those two?

Was this their response to my attempt at coexistence?

So much for olive branches.

I considered ignoring the message, as I always did. But I didn't want to, not this time. Maybe because the ones sending it weren't the Xunvirians themselves. Maybe because I didn't want to justify their views about me, to solidify my status as some sort of mindless villain. It's not that I really cared that much about what they thought, but I still had myself to answer to. And in some way, I wanted to stand my ground. To be heard. Even if they ended up siding with the Xunvirians anyways.

"Leave," I transmitted back. "You are not my enemies, I don't wish to fight you."

Strange, to speak again. Ever since I woke up in the ruins of Earth, I hadn't pronounced a word, hadn't needed to use my voice modulator. I remember thinking that I would always be alone, that I wouldn't talk to anyone again. It seemed I had been wrong about the latter, at least.

A few seconds passed without a response. I guessed they weren't expecting me to talk back, and were just going through the motions when they had sent their warning. I felt a faint amusement at the idea that just by speaking those few words I had already thrown a wrench in their carefully laid out plan, sending them off script.

Were their generals discussing how to proceed right now? Calling their leaders back home and asking for instructions? The different species that were represented in this fleet arguing to each other? I guessed that was one of my advantages. Not having to spend any time talking, convincing, coordinating different people and their agendas... No, my thoughts translated into plans and actions with the same speed and ease that I had once had when moving my own body.

"Terran. We are glad you've decided to communicate," they replied at last. The voice still had a synthetic tone to it that told me they were using some sort of translation tool, but the rhythm and intonation were slightly different, as if they had switched whoever was behind the microphone. "We hope that we can reach an agreement to end this conflict, and we want to welcome you to the galactic community, provided you are willing to meet certain conditions. However, you must stop your approach immediately. Your unwarranted attack on the Xunvir Republic..."

"Unwarranted?!" I interrupted. "The Xunvirians destroyed my world, exterminated my own species, down to the last one of us. If anything, I've been merciful so far."

A pause.

"Those... allegations are new to us," they said. "We will start an investigation regarding your claims, and should they

prove true-"

"They are true." I accompanied my response with a compressed info package of evidence. Video and audio recordings of the destruction of some of Earth's cities.

"...I see. We will examine this information. If we determine it to be authentic we can guarantee that the appropriate sanctions and provisions will be applied. We will also take it into consideration when judging your own recent actions. We can be lenient, but in return we need you to meet us midway and agree to our conditions."

"What conditions?"

"First, you need to stop your attacks, right away. Second, you will return the conquered systems back to the Xunvir Republic and dismantle any resource extraction outposts and factories you might have built in them. Third, you will refrain from any sort of exponential growth and limit the construction of new ships and machines to a linear rate, which will have to be verified by a team of observers from the Council."

A deep anger started boiling inside of me. Did they think I was *stupid*?

"Right," I said. "So you want to disarm me, reduce me to the point where I can't fight back. Where you can simply finish me off and complete the job the Xunvirians started. The answer is no."

"That is not our intention, Terran. Our objective is merely to prevent more loss of life. We can guarantee that your existence and your rights as a sentient being will be respected, and that..."

"Can you guarantee justice? That the Xunvirians will pay for what they did?"

I hadn't reached the Council fleet yet, but already I ordered my drones to begin accelerating towards it, grouping them into smaller squadrons according to their attack patterns.

"Justice, yes," they replied. "*Justice,* according to the law of the Galactic Federal Council. An impartial trial, driven by logic rather than emotion, where the Xunvirians can exercise their right to a defense. With economical and political sanctions in case they're found guilty, with those directly responsible going to prison. But not this. What you are doing is not justice, it's vengeance."

"So, a slap on the wrist, in other words. You are siding with them."

"Terran, we are not *siding* with..."

"Yes, you are! You might not be directly responsible yourselves, but you are enabling their behavior. They commit a genocide, murder an entire species, and they get to keep going. They get to have a future, the one they denied us... No, this here is what they deserve. And even this will be just a fraction of what they unleashed on us."

I had my support ships angle their flanks towards the enemy vessels, the laser projectors I had installed in them locking into targets.

"You can't pretend to fight the whole galaxy and win, Terran! This doesn't have to end like this. Stop now and we can discuss..."

"No!" I said. "Not until they've paid for what they did, until humanity has had its retribution. We have discussed

enough. I don't want to be your enemy, but if you side with the Xunvirians, if you try to stop me from doing what is only fair... then you will be no better than them, and I *will* fight you. This is the only warning *you* will receive."

With that, I ordered five of my large escort ships to open fire on one of the Xunvirian destroyers. Its protective shields came up immediately, wrapping the targeted vessel in the familiar looking soapy bubble.

But war was about numbers. It was about the output of the Xunvirian destroyer's power plant pitted against the combined potential of my five escort ships. Of the efficiency of its radiators, emanating the immense energy the shield was receiving back into space as heat, against the performance ratio of my re-engineered laser projectors.

The destroyer exploded, wrapped in a blue flash.

The Council fleet opened fire, targeting my main body and my support ships. The shield projectors I had installed kicked into action, withstanding the barrage as they drained energy from the ships' respective power plants.

My swarm surged forward like a crashing wave.

Thousands, hundreds of thousands of drones accelerating. A thick mass of ever shifting formations, corkscrew and fractal patterns. The combined movement of its constituent units making it look like it was some sort of gigantic living organism, morphing and changing, pulsating, always evolving.

But I knew where each drone was. I was in control, sending radio commands to each one of them, simultaneously telling

each and every one of them how to move, where to go. Receiving their responses, analyzing the feedback their sensors were always sending back to my central processing units. My mind integrating the information into a complete picture, the drones becoming part of me. A mere extension of my will. I always knew which of them carried laser projectors, and which transported my army of assault soldiers. I was always aware of where each thermonuclear warhead was.

Those I switched positions, kept them in permanent motion, weaving them in and out of formations, making sure they'd be hard to track by the enemy computers. Easy to miss in the sea of machines. As if I was playing a shell game with the enemy fleet, one with thousands of simultaneous moves. One where the numbers were disproportionate, and the stakes deadly.

I aimed most of my assault soldiers towards the Council fleet. I guessed it wouldn't be easy, but I wanted to capture some of the unusual ships. I had already learnt all that the Xunvirian war technology had to teach me, and I was ready for the next step. If the crashed vessel I had found in the destroyed colony was any indication, this Council's species were more advanced than the Republic, and it looked like reverse engineering their technology could give me an extra edge.

I had set my eyes in two of their largest ships in particular. One was marble white, its polished surface glinting under the vibrant light of the dozens of energy beams crossing the battlefield. It reminded me of a giant bone, as if I was looking at the femur of some titanic creature.

The second target was the biggest battleship in their midst. A starfish looking thing of iridescent blue and green colors.

Its ventral energy weapon was activated, sending a continuous stream of heat and energy that went crashing into the shield that protected my main body, dwarfing the other attacks I was receiving. That amount of power, the sheer strength of that weapon... Yes, I wanted to take over that one ship.

The amount of damage my body's shield was receiving from it was large enough that I expected it to collapse in less than a minute. So I had to recur to my escort ships. I ordered them to get close to my body, and to willingly put themselves in front of me, right in the path of the energy beam. To take the full onslaught for a few seconds at a time.

It was a complex maneuver, but it worked. As the shield in one of the ships was about to collapse, it moved out of the way just to be replaced by the next one. All of them sharing the load in turns, helping each other so that none of them would be destroyed.

As the front of my swarm neared the enemy formation, a few of the smaller Council ships moved forward. The gold and green wedge-shaped frigates positioned themselves at the front of their fleet, between my swarm and their most valuable battleships, and opened fire on my drones with their laser projectors.

Unlike what the Xunvirians had accustomed me to, these lasers weren't powerful. They didn't burn with the intensity of a small sun, weren't designed to take out battleship-class starships. No, these were low energy, thin white trails of light. But they had dozens, hundreds of them. Each projector swiftly tracking a drone and burning it down, then rotating towards the next target without a pause.

It was a good move, a good counter to my usual tactics. The Council had decided to go with quantity over quality for the energy weapons of their frigates. Apparently they were aware that my drones lacked shields, and so had correctly deduced that even a weaker laser would be enough to dispatch them. Rather than firing one too-powerful beam of energy at a single drone they had opted for firing tens of less powerful ones, each at a different target, allowing them to burn faster through the swarm.

Yes. A good move. I would have tipped my hat.

It was a pity they were acting on outdated intel, though.

I hadn't installed shields in all my drones, of course. That would have been prohibitively expensive. No, what I had done is designing a new kind of support unit, one that *only* carried a shield. Nothing else. I had built and placed several thousands of them scattered throughout the swarm.

I set these shielder drones to move forward now, accelerating through the thick of the swarm, the other crafts under my control moving out of the way in a choreographed motion to let them reach the front of the battle faster.

With a thought, their shields came online, thousands of new soapy bubbles appearing all over the place. Each one a few hundred meters wide, more than enough to cover both the machine casting it and its close neighbors, as if they were oversized umbrellas with room for an entire group of people.

It wasn't nearly enough to cover the entirety of my swarm, of course. But I didn't need to, I only needed to provide protection to the front lines, so to speak. To the drones leading the charge, the ones most battered by the onslaught of enemy fire.

To their credit, the Council commanders reacted fast to this new development. As one, their frigates stopped spreading their fire among multiple machines and started focusing their beams into a single target, trying to get at the one shielder drone that was at the center of each bubble.

Their previous decision to mount separate and weaker energy beams hindered them here, though. In the battle of numbers, focusing several independent laser projectors into a single target was less efficient than using a single, more powerful beam to begin with. There was simply more energy lost as heat to conductor resistance, more wasted power. Ironically, they would have been better off now had they not tried that one good move against me in the first place.

But my shielder drones weren't perfect either. They were small crafts after all, their power plants not really capable of offsetting the combined attacks the bubbles were receiving for too long. So now and then, their shields collapsed for a couple of seconds, the time their generators needed to cool off, to vent enough heat into space before the shields could be re-engaged again safely.

Two seconds of vulnerability for every twelve seconds the shield was up. Didn't seem like much, but it was more than enough for the enemy laser beams to destroy the drone casting it.

So I ordered the machines inside each protective bubble to swirl around the central shielder drone, making orbiting movements, spiraling clockwise and counter-clockwise without ever leaving the protection of the spherical shield. It was an attempt at confusing the enemy's tracking systems, difficulting their targeting of the shield caster.

I even went so far as to synchronize their movement with the bubbles' vulnerability periods, so that whenever a shield temporarily went down, one or two of my disposable drones would just *happen* to be in the path of the incoming enemy beams, sacrificing themselves to protect the critical shielder unit.

It was maddening. The amount of radio traffic filling the empty space, the amounts of information I was sending and transmitting with every single second. The stress of coordinating the movements of more than one million vehicles, of making sure each one of them was at the right place, at the right time. Of tracking enemy projectiles and calculating their future paths so that my machines could dance around them.

I had never fought like this. It was crazy. It was intense. It required my every thought, my every processing cycle.

And I loved it. I cherished every second of it.

I was making nested fractal patterns, designing paths that followed Fibonacci spirals, that drew sequences inside sequences, numerical progressions that manifested as whirling formations, apparent chaos that spontaneously resolved as order before disappearing again. The drones moved with fluidity, weaving in and out of complex evolving configurations that I didn't have time to consciously register before they were gone. With no room for second guessing, no time for over-analyzing my decisions, I was acting on pure instinct now. An instinct I didn't know I had, sending orders and applying patterns just because they *felt* right.

And they *were* right. Pure. It was a thing of beauty, of numbers that only I could see. A work of art only I could appreciate. That nobody else knew even existed.

And as the battle raged outside, as missiles crossed the skies and ships died and explosions blinded sensors and whirling drone formations wrapped around battleships... I was fighting an inner battle of my own, every bit as intense.

My processing units were in overdrive, my server farms burning hot. I was shifting through oceans of information, analyzing and correlating and projecting thousands of paths into the future, sending orders and receiving torrential amounts of input data from my million eyes. Constructing models of the battlefield and optimizing data structures, prioritizing targets and going through massive indexes to find the key attack patterns I needed to use.

I had drones surround the vanguard Council frigates, spiral around them, cut their hulls open with dozens of moving laser beams.

I discarded an entire dataset when I realized the battlefield had moved towards the upper levels of the brown planet's atmosphere, the minuscule drag created by the scattered atoms of nitrogen and oxygen nullifying some of my projections. Not by much, but I was standing over a very narrow edge, working at the very limit of my machines' abilities, drones sometimes flying right by each other with only two or three meters to spare. It had to be perfect.

Two Xunvirian battleships tried to flank the thick of my swarm, taking advantage of the confusing battlefield. But *I* wasn't confused. I had already estimated the high likelihood of their maneuver and had placed ten nuclear warheads in their predicted path. I detonated them now, the battleships vanishing inside the bright flashes.

My assault soldiers were now crawling across the outer hulls of the targeted battleships. I had them look for entrances,

blow open vents and force their way through narrow openings.

I was winning.

Despite the unexpected appearance of a new, numerous enemy. Despite the higher technology the Council fleet was deploying. Despite their clever tactics designed to counter mine.

I knew I was winning. The enemy fleet had managed to contain the tide of the swarm somewhat, but I knew their defensive positions were compromised, their entire formation about to collapse. I had only to push a bit further, a bit harder.

And then everything changed.

It felt like a slap to the face. Like being showered in cold water out of the blue. I wasn't entirely sure of *what* had happened, but I immediately knew something was *very* wrong.

My view had... fragmented. I could no longer hold a cohesive picture of the battlefield in my mind. I couldn't integrate all the information I was receiving from my drones into a single model. Instead, I now had separate views. Conflicting narratives. Drones popped in and out of my awareness, blinking like Christmas lights. As if they were being destroyed and immediately brought back to life. And I wasn't sure of where exactly any of my machines were anymore. I had two or three different positions for each, as if they had somehow doubled in my mind.

I was still trying to direct them, but their movements had turned spasmodic. My orders were inconsistent, and I couldn't visualize the swarm as a whole anymore. The

carefully constructed patterns and formations were unraveling fast, as drone collided into drone, as they drifted out of the protective bubbles and were promptly destroyed, as order turned into chaos.

I felt a cold fear in my gut. A sinking feeling. Something was *seriously* wrong here.

Was the problem caused by my own mind, somehow? Had any of my server farms crashed, crippling me? Was I having a virtual stroke of sorts?

I launched a desperate, quick diagnostic process to check my own databanks, my own processors and internal systems. It was a basic analysis, I knew, but everything looked okay.

So what was it, then?

I turned my attention towards a single drone, ignoring the rest of the now disorganized swarm. I ordered it to engage its thruster and move forward.

It didn't.

The cold fear turned icy.

I repeated the order. This time the machine obeyed, moving forward, but something odd happened. The drone was still reporting being at its old position, even though I could see it had moved through the visual sensors in my own body. The mismatch caused it to double in my mind, as if it had suddenly turned into two separate machines, one still, the other moving forward.

Odd. Disconcerting. Nauseating.

I told the machine to stop, but it ignored me and kept advancing, getting into the path of another drone. The two crafts collided at high speed, destroying each other.

Had all my drones suddenly turned stupid? Had the enemy hacked them?

No. I noticed they still were following their programming, their last orders. It was more like if they...

Ah.

I glanced into the low EM spectrum, paying more attention to the transmissions I was receiving, both from the drones as well as the background radio waves coming out of the planet. And then it clicked.

The problem wasn't in my drones, nor in my own processing units. No, they were all working just fine.

The problem was that I was being jammed.

The Xunvirians had tried that before, of course. They had tried to drown my communications in a deep blanket of EM noise, or use EM pulses against me. But invariably they had failed. My signals always came ahead, my transmitters too strong, my drones' electronics too well shielded and designed to work in an environment where nuclear warheads were going off left and right. I couldn't be jammed.

Except the Council had apparently found a way.

All the orders I was sending to my machines, all the feedback the drones were relaying back to me... it was all scrambled, distorted. All the signals, all the radio transmissions I was receiving or emitting were garbled.

Warped, doubled and tripled, just like light passing through some sort of strangely curved kaleidoscope. When I glanced into the EM spectrum, I felt like I was watching the world through eyeglasses that didn't fit my prescription.

I didn't even know such a thing was even possible, let alone how they were doing it.

Some of my messages survived the process relatively intact, and parts of the information the drones were relaying still contained some consistency by the time they reached me, which is why I still had *some* degree of control, spasmodic as it was. But it wasn't enough. Not to fight at the level I needed to.

War was numbers, and I had just lost mine.

As if to cement that thought, the enemy fleet opened fire. With all their energy beams at the same time, with a salvo of missiles. Ignoring the swarm. Focusing all their fire, all their destructive power on a single target.

Me.

My shields kicked in, my power plant struggling to keep up under the combined barrage. I started extending my radiator panels to vent the excess heat, even though I knew doing so in combat would risk the delicate surfaces getting damaged. But I needed an edge, I needed that extra five percent efficiency I knew I could get if I wanted to survive this attack.

That was when the super-charged beam of the starfish battleship opened fire again, targeting me.

I only had a fraction of a second of warning before my shields gave way.

I could still feel pain, I discovered. A very toned down version. Not the kind of pain I remembered feeling in the past. Not like that one time when I had accidentally cut my hand with a kitchen knife.

No, this was different. Muted, but oddly similar. I felt the impact, the heat. The shock, the loss.

The failure.

The powerful energy beam burned through my ceramic plates, straight past my second and third armor layers. It vaporized its way through internal storehouses and drone assembly factories. It cut fuel lines and energy conduits. I watched through the cameras inside my body as an expanding ball of flames and heat advanced along kilometers worth of maintenance corridors, walls bursting, sensors dying and platforms collapsing on its wake.

I didn't have time to take stock. No time to evaluate the damages I had just received before I felt the next impact, the next laser beam cutting deep into my structure and destroying one of my auxiliary thrusters, the resulting explosion shocking my entire body.

They were killing me.

Chapter 9

My first instinct was to get away. To run. All I wanted was to engage my warp drive and jump back to another system. Someplace safe, where I could take a breath, lick my wounds and repair my damages. But of course, that wasn't an option. My warp drive would take several minutes to get ready for a jump in the best case, and I wasn't going to survive for that long.

No. I was trapped here.

I wished I had never decided to tie myself to a single body. I knew I had done so as a way to keep myself human, a way to silent that always present inner voice that told me what I risked transforming into. But right now I would gladly pay that price to have a way to simply transfer my mind to a different set of processing servers, light years away from here. Or even to have made a backup of myself. Repulsive as that thought might still feel.

No time for regret, though. I had to do something. Right now.

I engaged my remaining thrusters and maneuvered so that one of my support ships would lie between myself and the starfish battleship, taking my place at being hit by the powerful energy beam. I knew it wouldn't last longer than the four or five seconds it would take the enemy to slightly reorient their ship -I couldn't really hide my twenty-seven kilometers body behind a two kilometers ship. But it would give me the short respite I so needed.

A few seconds in which to re-engage my shields and plan my next move, to figure out a way to survive the ordeal this battle had suddenly turned into.

My position was desperate.

I had lost my swarm, all my drones moving chaotically around the battlefield, with no order or purpose.

I had lost my support ships. Incapable of maneuvering, of returning fire... they had turned into little more than sophisticated floating boulders.

My own body was bleeding. There were uncontrolled fires inside my main structure, with entire sections that had lost power, or that were exposed to the vacuum of space. The damage wasn't catastrophic yet, and I managed to restore functionality to my shields thanks to the radiators gambit. But I was still being hit by a multitude of energy weapons, and unless that changed soon I had no doubt my shields would fail again on short notice. And when that happened... well, I knew I wouldn't survive many more of these kind of hits.

Strange, that I wasn't panicking.

Did I feel trapped? Yes. Shocked, confused? Sure.

But I wasn't panicking.

If anything, I felt a cold anger. It was like a comeback to my memories of the destruction of Earth. That same helplessness. These aliens were hurting me, brutalizing my body with their powerful weapons. I was trapped, defenseless. Facing overwhelming odds. That sense of failure, of having gone this far just to get beaten down

again. To be brought down to the ground, my weapons so easily stolen right out of my hands.

The idea of admitting defeat, of contacting the Council fleet to offer my surrender crossed my mind, but I rejected it with disgust. No, I'd rather die.

And it wasn't a figure of speech, I realized with some surprise. No, I really meant it.

I'd rather die.

I considered for a moment flinging myself straight towards the planet. Accelerating at the top speed my damaged thrusters would provide, pushing my way through the Council fleet's defensive positions, through the atmosphere... and crashing right into the world.

How big had the asteroid that killed the dinosaurs been? About ten kilometers, if my databanks didn't lie. I wouldn't be traveling that fast, true, but I guessed twenty-seven kilometers worth of spaceship falling out of the sky at top speed would still be pretty destructive.

And if I was going to die here, if this was as far as it would get... then I might as well go out with a bang.

But I didn't do it. Not yet. Instead, I considered my position, my options, trying to find some other path I could take. Some vulnerability in their plan I could still exploit, that would allow me to take back control over my drones.

I needed information. I knew I was being jammed, but little more than that. Was it me the only ship that was receiving this attack, or was it some sort of area disruption affecting the entire battlefield? Did distance influence the jamming?

Was it a single enemy ship doing this? And if so, was there a way for me to take it down?

My own radio sensors were useless, providing only garbled information. But those weren't the only sensors in my fleet.

I reached for my support ships, asking them to check their sensors, to tell me if they too were being affected by the strange distortion effect. Due to the complete communications breakdown, I had to repeat my orders several times before one of the ships replied, and when it did it took me some effort to interpret the distorted answer, causing the mounting nausea I was experiencing to worsen.

But I got my answer. Their radio sensors were working just fine.

So it was only me who was being jammed.

Interesting, but ultimately useless. My swarm was centralized through myself, all orders and commands originating from my own body. So even if the drones could still talk to each other, they didn't have anything to say to their partners. They were all listening to me, but I couldn't talk.

Or more like... I could talk, but my voice had turned into some unintelligible mess, with only a few clear words here and there.

I had originally thought about using the support ship's sensors to locate the source of the jamming, but given that whatever it was only affected my main body, it was pointless. The other ships couldn't locate what they couldn't see in the first place. Plus, the amount of coordination that it would have required was past my current diminished capabilities.

A salvo of enemy missiles approached my flank. Without the swarm, I couldn't have my drones fly to intercept them. I activated my own laser projectors, tracking a few of the projectiles and burning them down, but there were just too many and my energy weapons were too slow to get all of them.

Ironic, to be on the receiving end of one of my own tactics.

Four missiles impacted my hull, passing through my shields and leaving gaping holes in my flank, each new explosion destroying drone carrying compartments and internal hangars. I relaxed a bit when I noticed the projectiles had been loaded just with conventional explosives, rather than the nuclear warheads I would have used. I was thankful they weren't following my own tactics to the letter.

Still, it helped me realize how precarious my position still was. The only thing the support ship was protecting me from was that one single super-weapon, and even that was about to change as I could see the battleship rotating. But other than that, I was still exposed to anything the enemy wanted to throw at me. There was no way to hide, not here.

No. I had to find a better cover, and the only available one I could think of was to get into the thick of the swarm. Surrounded by the sea of my own machines. It wouldn't be as perfect as if I had instructed the swarm to blanket me, but it would offer much more protection than remaining in the open.

The problem was, I didn't really know where the swarm was anymore. Not exactly.

My view of the battlefield was fragmented, conflicted between the mismatched positions the drones were reporting, and those of my own sensors. I didn't see one

swarm, but dozens of them, as if coming from parallel realities. All superposed into each other, drones blinking in and out, moving between different planes of existence.

It was hard to look at, making my processing units struggle to find some sense out of the chaos. It felt like a building migraine.

I knew I had to let go of all that information. Surrender all pretense of control over my machines, even if it would leave me even more disarmed.

But I didn't second guess myself. No time for that, really. I just went ahead and cut all communications with my own swarm, stopping all radio transmissions. Discarding all data from my EM sensors and relying solely on my visual and gravimetric ones.

Immediately, the clashing views I had of the battlefield in my head all coalesced into a single, clear picture. The mounting headache simply vanishing.

It was an odd picture. My drones had always been a part of me, an extension of my own body through different means. But now, for the first time ever, they looked *separate*. It was unsettling. It reminded me of one time when I had been sleeping over my own arm, causing it to lose circulation. I had woken up to what felt like an stranger's arm wrapped around me.

The sea of machines looked similarly *strange*. They felt *alien*, inhuman even. Seeing them through my own sensors I couldn't perceive any of that order, of that beauty I had experienced before. It was strangely eerie, and I had the unnerving thought that the swarm was about to wake up from its slumber and start attacking me at any moment.

Was this how the Xunvirians saw my drones? How they saw *me*?

But the machines didn't attack me, of course, and I just couldn't afford the luxury of standing around until that ickiness I felt went away; so I just pushed it to the back of my mind and focused on the immediate task: getting into cover.

I identified a portion where the swarm was the thickest, a blob large enough to cover my entire body, and without thinking it twice I rushed towards it. I engaged my thrusters and accelerated, crossing the empty space as fast as I could. The moment I started moving, the starfish battleship's weapon fell again on my shields, draining them fast. But this time I was counting on that, and my shields managed to hold long enough for me to reach the blob.

I entered the thick of the swarm like a bowling ball, crashing into hundreds of machines, their bodies bouncing off the front of my hull, fragmenting into a sea of broken pieces, metal shards and engine components that followed my trail.

But it worked. Every single enemy warship was shooting at me, but they now had thousands of vehicles to go through before their weapons could reach my body. Their missiles couldn't find a clear path among the sea of floating, deactivated drones either. They exploded in the periphery, clearing out entire sections of the swarm, but still far enough from me that they weren't an immediate threat.

I had managed to get me a few minutes of respite, at least. But to do what, exactly?

I wasn't sure.

Could I maybe activate my warp drive now? Use it to get away?

Perhaps... at the rate the enemy was burning through the swarm I guessed I would have time to spool it and make a short jump away before they got to me. But that would require diverting the energy that was currently powering my shields up. It was a risky move. I was half blanketed by the swarm, yes, but now and then a lucky energy beam still managed to pass through and hit me for a couple of seconds. Shutting down the shields would leave only my outer armor to tank the occasional damage. It should be enough, but if I was unlucky enough to get hit again by the starfish thing, and my shields were down when that happened... well, better not to think about that.

Still, it seemed like a viable option, so I didn't discard it right away. But I wanted to try something else first. I wanted to see if I could get back my control over the swarm.

I still didn't know where the jamming was originating from. It felt like I was surrounded by a small bubble of the distortion effect, but I knew it had to come from somewhere else. Was it one of the enemy ships? Many of them? Or did it come from somewhere else entirely, maybe even the planet?

I just couldn't figure it out, didn't know enough about the technology they were using to locate its source. But now that I had removed the noise and confusion caused by the feedback coming from the faulty communications, and that I could spare the time to think, to pay attention to what was going on, I had noticed something else.

I still had control over my outposts.

My factories in the Centauri system, my resource extractors in the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter, my assembly

lines in the Lehman solar system... they were all working as intended.

I felt a dark amusement at the idea that I could easily send orders to a drone that was light years away, while the ones just a few meters from me were off-limits.

But the revelation was important. It meant that whatever jamming method they were using, it was only affecting the local radio spectrum. My quantum entangled relays were still working just fine.

Which... didn't help me much here. At least not on its own. The drones around me didn't have quantum communicators. Those were hard to manufacture, and too expensive to install in each single disposable drone. Specially when a simple radio transmitter sufficed.

Had sufficed, I corrected myself. At least until now.

But no, my quantum relays were... well, just that, relays. I had installed one at each outpost. I would send a message through the quantum link, and the relay would receive it and broadcast it to its own local space as a radio transmission. They had a low bandwidth, and introduced a delay that made them useless in combat conditions, but in essence they allowed me to control my outposts as if I was there. Almost.

But I had never thought of using quantum links to talk to the machines that were already next to me. After all, you don't use a telephone when you want to talk to someone who is already in the same room you are. And in my case, the drones didn't even *have* phones. Not even my support ships, which I had designed to take along with me.

Except that...

I could always *build* new phones.

Most of the assembly factories in my body were still operational. And while I had lost part of the raw resources and materials I was storing when some of my holding bays were destroyed, I still had plenty remaining.

I could just manufacture a quantum relay. Slap it into a drone's chassis, and eject it away from my body, past the bubble of EM distortion surrounding me.

Hopefully, I'd be able to reach it through the quantum link, and then have it relay my orders to control the nearby swarm just like I did my outposts. If I couldn't escape the bubble, maybe I could build me a backdoor.

I set out to work immediately, my assembly lines back into action. I decided to build not one, but two quantum relays, just so I would have a replacement in case the Council managed to destroy or jam the first one.

Transporting the materials from their storage areas and into the factories took some ingenuity, since the two main axial transport corridors were blocked by debris from the damage I had suffered. Instead, I used my internal worker units to carry the supplies through auxiliary maintenance corridors.

All the time, I was monitoring the Council fleet. They were focusing their attacks unto the swarm, using their energy beams to dig a tunnel through the sea of machines, their missiles taking entire chunks out of it. The drones were still moving, drifting slowly all around me, so any space the enemy cleared was soon reoccupied by new machines. It was as if the Council ships were trying to dig a hole in a sandy beach.

But it was working. Slowly but surely, their weapons were advancing towards me. I knew I wouldn't have much time to pull off my move.

I decided to skimp on the details, then. My new relay drones wouldn't have power plants of their own, like the ones in my outposts. No, these would work out of pre-charged batteries. I also decided against giving them the ability to move on their own. Instead, I would just set them to drift away from my body. That way I wouldn't need to install the always complex thrusters and fuel lines.

I was aware these manufacturing shortcuts would mean the relays' life expectancy would be in the order of half an hour to an hour. After that, their batteries would simply die, and they'd be unable to return home. But it didn't matter. At the rate things were going, if I hadn't won by then I would probably be dead.

While I built these two relay drones, I also focused on repairing my internal injuries. I removed the oxygen still in my corridors and hangars to quench the remaining fires, and vented the leaked flammable gases out of my body, so as to lower the risk of new accidental explosions. I ran internal diagnostics, re-routed power lines and fuel pipes, and had maintenance drones start clearing the main corridors again.

I noted that the living room I had built, the small reproduction of that memory from so long ago, had vanished. Along with the entire storage area that had contained it, which had now turned into a gaping hole exposed to space.

Strange, not having noticed that loss until now. But on second thought, I guessed it wasn't that surprising. I had

been more focused on survival than on pointless melancholy. I had to.

Less than three minutes later my first quantum relay drone emerged from its factory, and I had a couple worker machines push it out of a landing bay and into space.

Calling it a drone was a bit of a misnomer, though. The contraption was just a relay cobbled together with a radio transmitter and a battery, inside an otherwise empty spacecraft chassis. Hardly my best design, but maybe the most critical one if I could use it to escape this situation.

I waited for it to drift a few hundred meters away, far enough that I knew it would have crossed the bubble of jamming distortion. I reached to it through the newly established quantum link, and ordered it to relay my transmissions back into the EM spectrum.

Immediately, the swarm came back into focus, hundreds of thousands of machines popping into my awareness, eagerly awaiting my orders.

I felt a wave of relief wash over me.

With a mental smile, I accessed the machines' own EM sensors, relying in them instead of the still jammed ones in my main body. I restarted the attack patterns, ordering the drones to move forward again, towards the enemy. To engage their weapons, to surround the Council ships.

The Council fleet's response was quick, too. Getting back on the defensive, their weapons focusing again in bringing down the approaching swarm.

I started building back the complexity I had lost. The shielder drone grouping, the swirling pattern formations,

the...

Immediately, I realized it wouldn't work.

I had knew it all along, of course. I was aware that the quantum link's bandwidth would be too limited. That there would be an extra delay to my orders. But the idea of regaining control over the swarm had been too appetizing, too critical to second-guess.

But now that I was back in control, I was reminded of just why I never fought from the safety of my other systems. Why I was always in the front lines rather than relaying my orders through a quantum link to an attack swarm light years away.

It simply didn't work.

My drones were too stupid, their simple processing units only valid for receiving orders and executing them. They couldn't coordinate an attack on their own, move as a group and support each other, let alone engage an enemy and flank them in a complex spiral formation.

They relied on me for all that, my mind the only one with the big picture of the ongoing battle. It was me who told each and every machine how and when to act, how long to accelerate for, how far to move, down to the meter, with custom and specific orders.

But the quantum link didn't have enough bandwidth for me to do that for the entire swarm. My attack patterns weren't developing as fast or as complex as I needed them to be. I just couldn't get my messages fast enough to the machines, and by the time the recipients finally got them, the orders' validity had already expired.

So I had to decide: I could control the entire swarm with a very low degree of precision, just like I did my mining outposts. Giving simplistic general orders that didn't require precision or a complex coordination... and that would surely make the swarm as a whole too easy to defend against. A losing strategy.

Or, I could mount a very convoluted attack that used only a small fraction of all the machines, having the rest of the swarm lay still waiting its turn. Making the unattended machines an easy prey.

Another losing strategy.

I felt like screaming in frustration. I had played my last card, one I hadn't realized I ever had. And for what? Just to prolong my agony, my defeat.

And soon enough I wouldn't even have to take a decision myself, since I wasn't going to even *have* a swarm for too long, seeing as how the Council fleet was fighting off the incoming sea of machines, easily burning through them, their ships moving out of the way of my transparent and predictable attack patterns.

No. It hurt, but I had to admit it.

I wasn't going to win here. In fact, if I stayed this course, I was going to lose. My swarm was going to be destroyed. And then nothing would stop them from finishing me off.

I wasn't going to take out this keystone world. The Xunvir Republic wasn't going to collapse. Not today.

No. Today I was fighting for survival. Today I was fighting just to have a chance at fighting again tomorrow.

And with that acceptance, it came too a liberation of sorts. If my swarm was already all but lost, then I didn't need to care about preserving it for some attack against the planet that wasn't going to happen now. It freed my mind to consider new, more aggressive tactics.

I wasn't going to win but... could I somehow turn this sound defeat into more of a tie? Could I prevent the enemy from pressing this advantage? Give them wounds of their own that they would need to lick while I retreated and regained the strength I'd lost today?

Or in other words... could I sacrifice my swarm to utterly destroy the entire Council fleet?

A quick check at what remained of my sea of machines told me that, yes, perhaps I could.

But the plan would be risky. If I didn't time it perfectly it could as well end with me accidentally killing myself. And even if I did execute it without error, it was up to chance whether it would be successful or leave me in an even worse position.

And... I realized I didn't care. If this last move failed to take out the Council fleet, then I would just do as I had thought before and fling my twenty-seven kilometers self into the planet as fast as I could. Put an end to it.

So with that strangely liberating thought, I decided to go ahead.

I couldn't give out complex, personalized orders to my machines, not using this cumbersome relaying system. But I wouldn't need complex orders for this. Just a simple order, the exact same for each and every drone:

"Follow me."

I didn't wait to see if they did. I engaged my thrusters and accelerated as fast as I could.

Away from the battle. In the opposite direction from the planet. Away from the enemy fleet. And after a few instants, the cloud of machines followed me too in my hurried retreat.

The Council fleet stood still for a few seconds, maybe debating whether to call it a day and let me escape, or to follow me and try to finish me off.

But I knew what their answer would be. They were like sharks, attracted by the smell of blood. They were winning. They knew they were winning, and they wanted my head as a trophy.

Of course they pursued me.

I flew as fast as my damaged thrusters allowed me, the cloud of drones trailing behind me like a comet's tail. And behind them, almost the entirety of the enemy fleet followed, their battleships and destroyers having abandoned their previous formations.

I let the chase go on, continuously measuring the distance between my main body and the nearest drones. Too close, I knew it was too close. Immediately I realized I had overestimated the speed I could still reach, but I did my best, pushing my thrusters even further. Every meter I could gain, I knew, increased my chances at surviving the crazy maneuver I was about to pull. But every second that passed also increased the chances the enemy would wise up about what I was trying to do.

Should I pull the trigger now and risk killing myself, or wait and risk this whole ploy failing?

A difficult dilemma.

I had expected to have gained more of an initial distance over the cloud of drones, but the damage I had received earlier had affected my acceleration more than I had anticipated. I did a quick calculation, and discovered I would need to let the chase go on for more than five entire minutes to get to a completely safe distance.

It was too long, of course.

On second thought, maybe this had been a terrible idea. But I knew I was committed to it now, for better or for worse. Already gone past the point of no return.

I had to pull the trigger. I knew I was delaying. I didn't want to do it, but...

I sent another order to my swarm. Another simple one directed to all of the machines at the same time: *"Stop."*

They started decelerating. I kept moving forwards, getting away from the blob as fast as I could. Every meter counted.

The enemy fleet reacted fast too, but I knew it was already too late for them. Some ships tried to alter their trajectory to avoid entering the thick of the swarm. Others focused their energies in decelerating, rotating on their axes and trying their best at reducing their speed.

But of course, the laws of physics being as they were, it was futile. Their battleships and destroyers simply couldn't stop as fast as my nimble drones could. Too much momentum,

too much mass to decelerate. As one, the Council fleet dived right into the cloud of machines.

During the entire battle, the enemy had been aware of the shell game I was playing. They had done their best to stay away from the thick of the swarm, knowing the sudden and unexpected destruction that awaited those ships that got caught in it.

And now, all of them, all of their warships, all of their destroyers and cruisers and battleships and frigates were right in the middle of my sea of drones.

I checked the distance again. Was it safe?

No, not by a long shot.

But it would have to do.

I sent my last order. Again, a simple one, directed to all the machines, but that only about seventy thousand of them would understand.

The ones carrying thermonuclear warheads.

"Detonate."

It felt like staring right into a nova, all my sensors simultaneously saturating from the white hot flash and delivering an input overload to my mind that registered as *actual pain*. A piercing agony that lasted just a single, endless instant. A burning pain that I could feel shattering the walls of my sanity. As if I was experiencing days worth of torture compressed into a single tick of the clock. Into the few milliseconds that it took for the sensors to mercifully burn out.

For my entire outer hull to combust.

Chapter 10

CUSTODIAN::log_dump

ServiceName: Watchdog Daemon

Total execution time: 8774817891 seconds

Time since last incidence: 43 seconds

WARNING: Detected signal feedback loop in nodes EC4A-EF22

WARNING: Detected strong LFP desynchronization

WARNING: High risk of network fragmentation in nodes EC4A-EF22

Rebooting process: NCortex(7101)

"...Chicago."

I opened my eyes, raising my head to look away from the computer screen in front of me and towards the voice's source. Everything looked blurry, and I was confused for a second until I remembered I had removed my eyeglasses to take a short rest. Had I fallen asleep? Damn it.

I found the glasses next to the keyboard and put them back on, blinking hard to clear my vision as I looked at the person who had talked. Erik, my husband, stood leaning against the door frame of my office, a paper cup of steaming coffee in his hand.

"What was that?" I asked. My voice sounded slurry.

"I said, we've just lost Chicago. It's been bombed."

"Argonne?" I asked, almost instinctively.

"Went dark an hour ago. Destroyed, likely."

I let out a long sigh, closing my eyes again and resting my head on the back of the seat.

"Shit," I said.

"Right."

Odd, that I was more concerned at the lost of the laboratory than the city itself. It made me feel a pang of guilt. But after witnessing so much destruction, so much death... it was getting harder to conceptualize, to care anymore. There was simply no way to relate, to put a face to the millions of dead people, to visualize the lost lives, the destroyed families, rather than the number. The cold statistic. One more destroyed city.

But Argonne. Its loss impacted me in a more direct way. Impacted us. Losing the people there, some of whom had sent me mails that were still sitting unread in my inbox. Losing their research, the super computers... It was another roadblock. Another hurdle to overcome.

In a way, it felt like being trapped in a nightmare I couldn't wake from. One of those where you can see the exit, and you run towards it, but the faster you run the further the exit moves away from you. You can't never reach it, never escape the maleficent force chasing you, right on your heels.

I glanced at the code and diagrams displayed on my screen, then at the coffee cup in my husband's hand.

"Is that for me?" I asked.

He eyed me with suspicion. "How long have you been working for?"

"Ah... honestly, I don't know anymore."

"Hannah..."

"I know, I know," I said, raising my hands. "I'll take a nap or something once I'm done with this."

Erik shook his head, but walked into the office and placed the cup on my desk, next to the empty can of soda. He then stopped right behind my chair, resting his hands on my shoulders as he leaned over me to look at the screen.

"Again with the transfer function?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, reaching for the cup and its tasty, tasty contents. "I think I can still optimize performance by one point two or more. Should reduce the memory gaps if the neural scans can be done faster. But these equations Andrew added are obtuse as hell."

"Why don't you ask him to help you?"

I turned to look up at my husband, raising my eyebrows. "I don't know? Because he's an asshole, maybe?"

"Hannah..."

"I swear to God, Erik, if you give me again the 'Yay Teamwork!' bullshit thing, I'm gonna pour this whole cup of coffee all over your head."

He chuckled. "As if you would waste a perfectly good coffee."

"Don't try me," I muttered, taking a sip. The holy nectar bringing a new life into my body.

"Just... don't lose sight of the big picture, okay?"

I nodded. "All right. Whatever... I'll give it another try, then go ask the asshole if I still can't figure it out."

"And sleep."

"There will be time for sleep, after we all have..." I paused, not wanting to finish the sentence. Not that I needed to, I felt Erik's hands squeezing my shoulders.

Awesome. And now I was crying. Way to ruin the mood. Fucking genius, that's me.

Sending SIGTERM signal

..Suspending neural oscillation

..Stopped execution of core networks

..Saving cache contents in PB-storage. Link node: A084

..Flushing cache

Process stopped: NCortex(7101)

I was sitting on my usual chair at the meeting room, right by the end of the table and next to the large projector screen. I played with the pen in my hands, making it spin around my thumb. It was still a work in progress, though, I hadn't fully learnt the mechanics of pen spinning yet, and sometimes it would fly out of my hand and clatter across the central table.

It did so now, attracting the gazes of Oliver and Emily.

"Andrew, could you please stop doing that?" Oliver said.

I clicked my tongue, and placed the pen on the table, aligned with my notebook. He went back to looking into his own papers.

I placed my hand flat on the table, and started tapping rhythmically my fingers to the tune of 'We Will Rock You'. Oliver shot me a murderous look, but I ignored him. Ever since he had lost his children when Vancouver got bombed, he had become unbearable to work with. Easy to enrage, specially when I was around.

It's not that it wasn't sad and everything. I got that. But the guy acted like he was the only one who knew what losing people was like.

Well, fuck that. Welcome to the club.

I looked at my watch while we waited for the love birds to arrive. The daily meetings annoyed me. Half an hour that I could invest in doing something productive rather than listening to everyone babbling about their own problems, as if we were in group therapy. We all had things to work on. We all were so far behind schedule that we didn't even use schedules anymore. And that was exactly why we didn't need these things to distract us even further.

This time, though, I was actually interested in what Erik would have to say. After Argonne had went kaput, we all knew there would be changes to the project. I could already guess what they'd be, but it would be nice to know for certain.

Hannah entered the room, carrying her perennial cup of coffee. But rather than sitting down, she approached me. I raised my eyebrows. That was curiosity, right? Raising eyebrows?

"Andrew", she said. "Ah... I've been going over the transfer function-"

"Again?" I asked.

"Yes, again," she said. "I've been trying to figure out what the code you added-"

"Have you read the docs?"

Her face gave me an expression I didn't understand. Angry? Confused? Whatever.

"Yes, Andrew, I've read the docs. But the last variable is not documented, and the code is not clear about what it does."

"Ah, that's probably the time derivative of the local field potential." And what did she mean that the code wasn't clear? It was pretty self-explanatory.

Hannah's mouth opened slightly and her eyebrows perked up as she turned towards her seat. That was... inspiration? Insight?

"You're welcome!" I said. But Erik was already entering the room and closing the door behind him.

We all stared at him in silence.

War, the kind of total war where survival was at stake, brought not only destruction but also technological advances. Unprecedented leaps, the kind that just weren't possible in peace time. It was as if people didn't realize the importance of research until someone else was trying to kill them with a bigger gun.

So, just like World War Two had brought rocket engines and the power of atoms, this current one could unlock new sources of energy, automated 3d printing factories and assembly lines, computerized flying war drones... and the secrets of consciousness and artificial intelligence. Maybe even virtual immortality, if we could pull that one off.

Emily would have something poetic to say about it, probably. Something about beautiful things coming out of bad ones, about butterflies having ugly beginnings or whatever.

This, our work here, it was a modern Manhattan Project of sorts, one of many across the world.

Except, of course, that none of these people were Oppenheimer. None of them were Fermi. No, the

Oppenheimers, Einsteins and Fermis of our generation had died during the first attacks, vanished in the initial chaos.

The people in this room... well, they were the second best.

We were fucked, in other words.

Erik started talking. "Good morning, I hope that you..."

I tuned him out and went back to working on the equation in my notebook. It was an heuristic function to determine the compatibility between separate artificial neural fields. Or human neural scans. They were basically the same thing, anyways.

I scribbled notes and pseudo-code for a few minutes. The key thing on making the networks compatible was determining the gateway nodes, the connections that could be used to isolate the rest of the structure and treat it like a black box. And once those were enumerated, they could be matched to the counterparts in the second...

"...the Supreme Allied Command has granted us direct authority over the Custodian program's codebase," Erik was saying. I perked up at that, just like the rest of the table.

The Custodian, the computer program that had been given centralized control over every power plant, every autonomous factory, every jet fighter, missile battery, computer network... that still existed in the planet. And we were now in its charge.

"They are giving us the keys to the kingdom?" said Emily. "Why?"

Erik bit his lip. That was... nervous?

"Well... I'm afraid the Ark Initiative has been terminated," he said. "Command doesn't believe we can scan a sustainable amount of the civilian population to ensure..."

"Bullshit!"

"What?"

"Then why are we still here?" asked Oliver.

"They said our research is still valuable, and want us to integrate our technology into the Custodian program."

Everyone stood still, mulling over the significance of that single sentence.

"What in the bloody hell are you implying, Erik?" asked Emily.

Erik raised his arms, with what I judged was a nervous smile. "Now... we've been through this before. We considered the different alternatives should the..."

Oh, enough with this bullshit. I snapped my fingers, and everyone turned to stare at me.

"He's saying that they want us to build Skynet," I explained. "Now... can we please get back to work, Erik?"

Performing integrity check...

Checking CUSTODIAN interface link: ...Passed.

Checking PB-storage: ...Passed.

Checking IO/connectivity: ...Passed

Checking Neural Nodes: ...

WARNING: Structural damage found in nodes EC4A-EF22

WARNING: Integrity check FAILED

The Custodian's source code was, simply put, interesting. It had a certain aesthetic. Elegant, pleasant to look at. I didn't know who the original programmers had been, but I'd have loved to meet them and ask them about the design choices they had made.

What made it so interesting was its adaptability. The program was designed to scale, to grow organically so that more dependent units could be connected to it at a minimal performance impact. At its current rate it was controlling thousands of installations across the world and tens of thousands of military crafts and drones. And yet it was running at a small percent of its theoretical upper limit.

The problem, of course, was its complete lack of creativity. The Custodian was smart... for a computer AI program. Which meant it was pretty stupid by anyone else's standards. Currently it depended on humans giving the orders, but that meant a lot of efficiency and coordination was lost in translation. Giving it a consciousness of its own, one that could *see* the different units as an extension of itself, integrate the feedback into an instinctive mental model, might fix that.

Hannah and Andrew were working on that. On the consciousness problem, digitizing a human mind and putting it into a computer. I knew any day now they would come up with a solution to the main roadblock in front of us: all the cerebral scans we had made had enormous missing regions. Holes in the mapping process that made the resulting scans useless.

Unless we wanted to put a lobotomized person in control of the world's entire military, that is.

But they would solve it. I was sure of that. Which meant that my own work was more important with each passing day. Whenever the rest of the team had the artificial consciousness ready, I would need to make sure it could interface with the Custodian program itself, and take control over its resources.

It wasn't an easy task. The artificial mind would be a neural network, and the Custodian was a clever yet traditionally structured computer program. Two paradigms that didn't mesh that well. My intention was to have the Custodian work underneath the conscious level, as if it was some sort of reptilian brain, controlling the body's vital functions. Except this body would be composed of military crafts, camera lenses and 3d printing factories, rather than lungs, eyes, a heart and...

The door closed behind me. I turned to look at the newcomer, Emily, who was leaning against it with her arms crossed.

"Oliver," she said. "Tell me you at least aren't happy with this."

"Emily..."

"I don't understand it. We were supposed to save humanity! And now we are creating this... thing. This monster. And apparently I'm the only one who has a problem with it?"

I shook my head. "I know what you mean, Emily," I said. "I really do. But you know it's true. We missed our train with the Ark. There's no way we could have fixed the scan problem and *then* went around town to town scanning people. Have you look at what's going on out there?"

She sighed. "And how does this help anyone?"

I looked back at the source code on the screen. "It... doesn't. Not really... It's just the Supreme Command throwing a Hail Mary."

"What do you mean?"

I shook my head. "I mean they're desperate, and think maybe this thing will trigger a technological singularity or something... saving what's left of us in the process. Doubtful, if you ask me. But even if it doesn't, maybe something of us will survive through it." My eyes drifted towards the picture of my family that rested on the desk. "And... maybe it can bring justice."

Retribution. It was that word, that concept, that motivated me. The reason I was still working here, spending hours at a time submerged deep into the Custodian's code. Sleepless, almost without eating any food, going to the bathroom only when I couldn't hold it anymore.

I didn't care about the future. About humanity. Not really. Not after losing my children. I knew I should, I knew that there was still some hope, faint as it was. But... I just couldn't find it in me.

Retribution? Justice? Vengeance?

Yes, I could still care about those. And if we were making a monster, like Emily said, I would go the extra mile to make sure it was the scariest, most powerful son of a bitch in the entire galaxy. I would give it all, if only for the sake of it avenging their deaths.

"So that's the plan, then..." she was saying. "We choose a scan at random out of the database, put it in control over the entire planet, and hope he or she knows what they're doing?"

I let out a tired smile. "No. The scans in the database are useless. They were done with the first encoding protocol. Too many inconsistencies. We will have to make a new one."

"You just said we wouldn't go out..." she paused, her eyes going wide as she realized the true meaning of what I had just said. "You mean... No."

I nodded. "Yes... it will have to be one of us."

Launched structural recovery process (nodes EC4A-EF22)

Rebuilding local indexes

Propagating neural connections

ERROR: Could not reconnect node ED1F

Discarding node ED1F. WARNING: This can result in permanent information loss!

Structural recovery process completed (with 1 error)

I glanced at the people gathered in the break room, trying to judge their mental states. Their worries. The problems each one had and tried to hide. Those, I had discovered, were the ones most dangerous. The project had always been more likely to derail due to interpersonal conflicts than to any technical issue.

Emily, for instance, worried me. She was writing in her laptop, almost as if refusing to look at everyone else. I knew she hadn't taken well the cancellation of the Ark Initiative. It had been her brainchild, after all. The idea of cheating death, of escaping the destruction of our planet by way of making a virtual refuge. It wasn't surprising Command had ended up pulling the plug on that. It had always been a secondary option, never receiving the same funds and resources the other projects had. The Custodian, the new power plants, the drones... all of those projects had promised a victory, a practical result.

None had delivered it.

Emily... she was still collaborating with the group for the time being. But I knew just how easy it would be for that to come to an end.

Oliver worried me in a different way. He had poured himself into his work, to an intensity I had never seen before in him. It was a huge red flag waving over his head, of course, but I found myself unable to restrain him, to tell him to take it easy. Because the sad truth was that we needed his work, desperately needed him to succeed.

Andrew... well, Andrew was Andrew. Annoying, maybe. But in a way, he was the easiest of them to deal with. The most predictable. As long as he had a technical problem to solve, he was content.

Hannah seemed... okay? She had taken well to working alongside Andrew, and they had been making huge strides lately. It was a good mix. Andrew was a genius with an incredible focus, but Hannah had that out-of-the-box creativity, that unintuitive spark that Andrew lacked. They complemented each other well. And she looked more optimistic now than she'd been since the attacks started. I was happy for that, even if it meant she had less time to spend with me.

In fact, she had a beaming smile plastered in her face right now.

"I... We've cracked it!," she announced to the group as I entered the room and closed the door. Closing the door had became more of a ritual at this point. We were the only five people who still remained here, who had decided to keep working rather than leave and spend our last days with our respective families.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"We know how to make a viable artificial consciousness out of the scans," Andrew clarified.

Everyone else perked up at that.

"The problem," Hannah said, "was that we were focusing too much on preventing the holes in the scans. A few days ago I realized that was a dead end. We weren't making any progress, so I asked myself if maybe there was a way we

could fill out the missing parts instead. I talked it with Andrew and... turns out we can!"

"How?" it was Emily, this time.

"Simple," replied Andrew. "The gaps follow a random distribution, different for each person, which means we can simply use a few scans from different people and overlay them all into a single network. The missing parts in one scan are covered by the correct information in the other ones. The holes don't line up, so we can resolve it into a single, complete, viable combined scan."

"Our plan is to scan all five of us," said Hannah, still beaming, "and use ourselves as the basis for the super consciousness."

A silence.

Emily's mouth opened, and her eyes jumped from Hannah to Andrew, then back to Hannah.

"Are you two out of your bloody minds?" she asked.

"Why?" Hannah said. "It'll work!"

"It... this is like taking random pages out of five different books and mixing them all into one," Emily said, "then pretending the result will make any sense. It won't! It will be rubbish!"

"Not necessarily," said Andrew. "There are millions of ways to combine the networks. Some are rubbish, but others are much better. We only need a way to evaluate them all, and then we can choose the best combination. The optimal."

"Which is where you come in, Emily," added Hannah. "We need you to prepare a battery of psychological evaluation tests we can run past the candidate networks, that tells us which one is the most stable."

"Hold on a second," interrupted Oliver. "You said millions. How much time will it take to evaluate all those possible combinations?"

Andrew shrugged. "More like billions. We can use an evolutionary algorithm. But it'll take it a whole year, sure. Maybe more, depends on the tests we use... It doesn't matter, we will have to program the Custodian to do it for us, given that we will all be dead in about two months tops."

Everyone glared at him.

"What? I can't be the only one who noticed we aren't getting our weekly supply deliveries."

"What about humanity? What's the point of making this thing if there's nobody left to *save* by the time it wakes up?" asked Emily.

Hannah shrugged. "It's the only option we have. We'll have to cross our fingers and hope that enough people manage to find ways to survive until it's ready, but that's out of our hands."

I looked at Oliver. "Can the Custodian be programmed to do this?"

He nodded. "I think so, yes. And if it's going to take that long, I can set it to hibernate until it has chosen that perfect combination. It'll save power and hopefully stop the motherfuckers in orbit from noticing something is online down here and targeting it... Yeah, I guess it can be done."

I nodded. "What about you, Emily?"

She looked at me with fury, then at Andrew.

"There's no way I'm going to be part of any hive mind."

"It's not a hive mind," Andrew said. "It'll be a single, unified consciousness. Just like you are still only one person, even if you have two brain hemispheres. The only difference is that it will have memories and personality traits from all of us."

"Oh, sorry. So you're not making a hive mind, you are just making Frankenstein's monster!"

He paused a moment, then nodded. "Yes. That would be a more appropriate metaphor."

"Bloody... And can you also make a therapist, Andrew? Because whatever thing comes out of that process, it's going to need one."

"It might experience what we could call a moderate psychological trauma," Andrew said. "But I think the plasticity of the network will allow the consciousness to integrate the different personalities into one. It might need to discard or resolve conflicting memories, of course. Specially those with more than one perspective, such as our respective memories of these meetings. But..."

Emily looked at the rest of us, shaking her head. "Okay, I know that Andrew doesn't *get* what's wrong with this. But what about you? When did you stop trying to preserve humanity and started trying to create monsters?"

"This is still preserving humanity, Emily," said Hannah. "Your memories, your personality will live on."

"No. Speak for yourself," she said. "I'll rather die a human than become that... abomination."

"Then you'll die," said Andrew. "In two months or so."

Emily took a step towards him, her right fist clenched and her mouth a thin line. But then turned and stormed out of the room, slamming the door in her wake.

So... that went well.

"Thank you, Andrew," I said.

He shrugged. "Just stating the obvious."

"What about you, Erik?" Hannah asked me. "Are you in?"

I sighed. "Do you really think this is the best option?"

She locked eyes with me. "The best? No. The best would have been the Ark. But this... this is all we have now. This is the only way some part of us will survive. And... who knows, maybe there will be other survivors. Maybe we can help them rebuild Earth once we become a super intelligence or something."

"Or avenge it," said Oliver, his eyes gazing at the empty table with a strangely absent expression.

"All right," I said. "No promises, but let me talk to Emily first. I'll do my best to convince her."

Restarting process: NCortex(7104)

Pre-warming cache

Loading PB-storage

Loading core networks

Structural sumcheck has changed. Performing psych eval test (QV).

Psych eval test (QV) results: FAILED (score -17 under baseline)

I stood in front of the closed door, wearing a green hospital gown. Even outside the room, I could already hear the faint buzzing noise coming from the machine inside. On one hand, I didn't want to enter. This was something I had promised myself I wouldn't do. A boundary I had set to myself. One that I was about to break.

On the other hand, the air was cold and I wanted the door to open already. Get done with it and back into my own clothes.

Hannah's voice came from behind the closed door.

"Your turn, Emily."

At last. I opened the door and entered the room, not giving myself time to think twice about it. To chicken out.

The scanner dominated the room. It was an enormous toroidal machine, not unlike those used in hospitals, with a central opening where the patient's table slided. Except this one had open panels all around it, its electronic components

exposed. Wires hanging from its sides, connecting it to a multitude of electronic devices and computers. It seemed Erik had been making recent changes to it.

Hannah sat behind the desk in the far corner of the room, hidden from view by three large computer screens. I was somewhat glad it was her, and not Erik or Andrew here.

"You know the drill," she said. "No metal past the yellow line painted on the floor. And did you take the contrast?"

"Yes," I said. "You do remember I wrote the patient protocol for these things, don't you?"

"Yeah, yeah... just dotting the i's. You can get on the table whenever you're ready."

"Sure," I said, approaching the scan table like one would a wild animal. "Remember me again why the hell did I agree to this?"

"Ah... I think you overheard we would be spending our digital afterlives with Andrew, and you couldn't face the idea of not being with him. Wasn't that it?"

I chuckled. I knew she was saying it just to make me relax, but it worked. Kind of. I silently thanked her as I climbed onto the table.

"The remote next to your right hand will stop the machine if you panic, but I'd rather you don't use it. We'd have to start over again and it'd be a pain to reset everything, so just keep your eyes closed during the procedure if you are claustrophobic or something."

"You'd make one hell of a nurse, you know that, Hannah?"

The table started sliding slowly into the machine. It felt like being devoured alive by a mechanical maw. I closed my eyes.

"Hah! Joke's on you, my mom was a nurse. I learnt all my bedside manners from her."

The scanner started spinning, the noise intensifying, surrounding me. Like having your head inside a washing machine.

"Hey Emily..." Hannah's voice sounded far away, muted by the wall of spinning electronics. "Thank you, for doing this. I knew you had doubts, still have them... but... becoming a super intelligence just wouldn't have had the same luster without you there too."

"No," I muttered, but she couldn't hear me. "It won't be *us*."

As the machine spun, I tried to focus my mind on a single thought, a single idea. That of humanity. Of being human.

I knew it wouldn't make a difference, of course. The scan wouldn't be influenced by my current thoughts. No, it only recorded the deeper, major structures of the brain. The patterns and connections that made me, me. That defined my personality, that stored my long term memories.

These very thoughts, they would be lost, just like I never remembered the last thoughts I had right before falling asleep.

But still I focused all my attention into it, just in case. Ignoring the now deafening noise, the vibrations my whole body felt. Making sure that if something of me made it into the final mix, if something of me remained... it would be that idea.

Human. I had to remember that. I had to remain human.

It was important.

Searching for alternative backups... Found: 0

Resuming load despite psych eval test (QV) error.

Enabling IO/connectivity

Connecting neural network to PB-storage

Connecting neural network to CUSTODIAN interface

Re-starting neural oscillation

NCortex(7104) reboot fully completed (with 1 error)

Chapter 11

Under the light of Xunvir's only sun, the Empyrean Palace gleamed like a beacon. Like a massive jewel, its polished outer walls reflecting the light of the day and bathing the gardens around the grand building in soft green and blue hues. Here and there, single hieroglyphs shone in golden tones. Majestic symbols of a passed era still engraved onto the Palace's facades.

The sight was magnificent. Breathtaking. It had been designed to be so, Daokat knew. Carefully engineered to draw the attention of the eye, to inspire, to be a constant reminder of the glory and supremacy of a Xunvir Empire that no longer existed.

But today the gemstone-like appearance of the Palace reminded Daokat of a different quality glass had in common with the Xunvir Republic: its fragility.

Daokat had returned to a different Xunvir than the one he had left behind with Nakstani. People here looked scared, shell-shocked. On edge. After the destruction of Yovit, the Republic hadn't been able to keep the nature of the menace in secret anymore, and the tense conversation between the Council and the Terran in orbit over Anacax-Farvin had also leaked, adding fuel to the flames.

Now, the Republic at large knew that an exponential replicator was bent on destroying their civilization as a revenge for some horrible crime they didn't remember

committing. Not only that, but they had watched the creature vaporize an entire Council fleet during the battle that followed, that had been broadcasted live to the entire population, up until the satellites in orbit around the planet had died in the final blast.

When Daokat had received the reports on the battle he had felt a sinking sensation. His worst predictions had came true, just as he feared. Negotiations had broken down right after they started. The Council's secret weapon had failed to stop the Terran, which if still alive would now consider them all as enemies. A combined fleet of the strongest nations in the galaxy, with some of the most technologically advanced warships ever built, had just been wiped out...

He knew that the Council was far from defeated, but it would take some time before they could muster their forces and mobilize another fleet of similar firepower. And meanwhile, people back at the Council Core worlds had started looking for culprits. Having been the one to personally talk to the Terran, the-Zakarnine was being heavily criticized, which Daokat feared might discourage the Grand Minister from further attempts at a peaceful resolution, opting instead to take a step down and let the military take both the initiative... and the blame.

The only positive outcome was that they had managed to stop the Terran from destroying yet another world. Might have even killed the monster, in fact, though he doubted it. It wasn't clear what had happened after the last major explosion, but Daokat wasn't too optimistic about that. At least the replicator's offensive had been thwarted for the time being. A temporary respite. Though how long that would last was anyone's guess.

Which was why Daokat was frustrated. They had arrived at Xunvir a whole two days before, but the local military authorities had refused to let the strange ship the Terran had built land on the planet itself. They had been diverted to one of the orbital planetary defense stations and interrogated separately, more than once. At least, they had received medical treatment for their more important injuries. But the lost hours frustrated him, when every passing minute might mean one more lost opportunity to gather information on the Terran's origins and put it to good use.

The excessive paranoia was just another example, Daokat thought as he walked across the gardens, of how scared and horrified the Xunvirians were. They were closing ranks around the old tribal lines. A population divided, and in the verge of panic.

A dangerous combination, Daokat knew. Panic had the potential of turning sapient species into mere animals, reacting with equal unpredictability, lashing out even at those trying to help.

And the ruling elite of the Xunvir Republic must have been aware of that, because the Palace was surrounded by a veritable army. Armored soldiers wrapped in mechanical suits patrolled the gardens. Transport vehicles moved both supplies and troops here and there. They had installed explosive traps, portable guided missile launchers, anti-siege weapon platforms, shield barriers, automated defense towers...

None of them, Daokat knew, would make any difference should the Terran had survived and decide to attack the capital.

No. They weren't defending the Palace from the Terran, but from a more immediate, closer danger. That of the Republic's own citizens and tribes. Of the many other smaller enemies that might want to take advantage of the weakened situation of Xunvir.

He reached the stairs leading up to the Palace's southern entry, and was stopped at a checkpoint manned by the Emperor's Guard, the soldiers hand-picked by the Emperor himself. Or more likely, Daokat thought, by one of his staff. This time they weren't wearing the golden, flashy uniforms they always used in official events, but some nondescript black and gray combat armor instead.

With a hint of worry, Daokat also noticed that alongside the official golden emblem representing the Guard itself, many of them had taken to wear colored stripes. The colors of their respective tribes. He recognized some of the most influential ones. The red and yellow from the Verusna tribe, the same one the Emperor belonged to. The blue and white of Anacax. A dark green representing the Sokoks...

Was this a sign that the soldiers were no longer responding to the Congress of the Republic, or even to the Emperor himself? Were they openly declaring their true allegiances?

Or was he over thinking things? Maybe it was just posturing, each tribe flaunting their strength, sending messages to the other tribe leaders by way of little stripes. He knew that it would have only taken a single tribe to start a chain reaction.

Whatever the case, it was worrying. Xunvir's previous history as an Empire was full of tribal wars and internal conflicts. It hadn't been until their discovery of warp technology and the ensuing *Empyrean Decree* that these

wars had receded somewhat, the tribes successfully redirecting their ambitions towards outward expansion rather than inner power struggles, colonizing and conquering new star systems rather than fighting for control of Xunvir itself.

Of course, no Empire in the history of the galaxy had managed to keep expanding forever. And inevitably, the Xunvir Empire had too ran into a rival it couldn't beat: the Galactic Federal Council. The resulting crushing military disaster had put a final end to the age of the warring tribes and transformed the Empire into the current Republic. The tribes were still there, of course, still aggressively competing. But now they did so through politics and market economy.

Or they were supposed to, Daokat thought. Because this? A return to the tribal armies, faint as this signal might be, was a very disturbing thought.

"Daokat, yes? Of the Council?" asked the soldier closer to him in a guttural voice.

"Acting Ambassador Daokat," he confirmed. "I have an urgent appointment with the Emperor."

The Xunvirian solder's head bobbed. "You are awaited. Go to the Courtyard of the Admirals." His accent was hard to understand, but at least he could speak the Council's Interlanguage. That was common among the Republic's elites that had been practicing the language for years, but not so much with the rest of the population.

Daokat nodded and climbed the stairs quickly. The sense of foreboding danger he had felt before got stronger the moment he entered the building. The ancient artifacts and unique works of art decorating the main corridors were in

the process of being removed and placed into metal boxes, no doubt in order to be sent somewhere safer. Half the people he crossed were either soldiers, part of the Emperor's Guard, or openly carried handguns or weapons of some kind.

He consoled himself that he could still see some of the government workers he had gotten used to, still at their usual positions. Administrative staff, security chiefs, senior officers and advisers... it meant that, at least, there was still a semblance of normality.

The Courtyard of the Admirals wasn't really a Courtyard. It was a wide, high vaulted corridor. And the *Admirals* were the dozens of life-sized bronze statues that lined its walls. Like the ones decorating the terraces outside, these too had small placards underneath. Except that in the case of the statues in the Courtyard, the placards didn't narrate any military stories. There was no mention of legendary battles, glorious assaults or inspiring last stands.

No, all the placards here followed the same austere format. The name of whomever the statue represented followed by a short inscription, always the same in every placard:

Of Exalted Will.

Daokat had visited the corridor before, of course, the first time he had toured the Palace with Nakstani, still fresh in his new position.

The ones honored here, he knew, weren't just military heroes, competent generals and courageous soldiers.

No, these were all of those things, and more. These were the pioneers. The leaders that had ventured into the unknown, weapon in hand, spearheading the military expeditions that

had conquered entire star systems and colonized new worlds in the name of the Empire. Half explorers, half conquerors.

Some had limited luck, their greatest achievement being the establishment of a small mining outpost in some nondescript forgotten moon. Others had led massive fleets, fought years long wars of subjugation against neighboring alien nations, built new colonies in recently acquired green planets, forged new trade routes... But all of them, no matter their successes or failures, were granted the same honorific rank of Admiral, the highest rank in the Xunvirian fleet.

When he had visited the place before with Nakstani, she had joked at how misleading the room's name was. That the Courtyard of the Admirals wasn't a courtyard, and didn't feature any actual admirals. Just conquerors and warlords bankrolled by one tribe or another.

The Emperor himself waited almost by the end of the corridor, next to one of the statues. The last time Daokat had seen the head of government, the Xunvirian had looked confident and energetic, talking to his subordinates and political peers at the dinner. It was hard to believe it was still the same Emperor.

Despite being taller and bigger than Daokat -just like all Xunvirians were-, the Emperor somehow managed to look small and frail. He was wearing a reinforced gray combat coat over his favored silky white garments, making for an odd combination. The military gear didn't really fit his body, and Daokat guessed it wasn't his to begin with.

Daokat wasn't sure he could place the feeling the Emperor's posture and body language conveyed. Not scared, exactly, but... beaten? Resigned?

He waited for the Emperor to address him, according to protocol, but the Xunvirian didn't react to his presence, not even looking at Daokat.

Eventually, he got tired of waiting.

"Emperor," Daokat said. "I believe we've been introduced before. I'm Daokat, Acting Ambassador for the Galactic Council. We had an appointment."

The Emperor's four eyes moved to stare at him, the rest of the Xunvirian's body still. Eventually, the leader spoke in a tired voice, his words slow and measured.

"Yes, I remember you. Tell me, Daokat. I have been a good ally to the Council, yes? I have agreed to your proposals, I have followed the treaties to the letter, I have committed to the political and economical reforms your experts outlined, and pressured the tribes to implement them. Is that not true?"

Daokat blinked. Was what this all about? Better to play along for now.

"That is correct, Emperor. The Council is very pleased with your effort so far, and we hope that the ties between our-"

The Xunvirian took a step forward, towering over him. "Then explain to me, Acting Ambassador Daokat of the Galactic Federal Council! Explain to me why your people have betrayed us!"

Daokat's eye membranes contracted at the sudden outburst. He had almost expected the Xunvirian to attack him, but the Emperor didn't look angry so much as bitter.

"I... I'm not sure I understand, Emperor," Daokat said. "How has the Council betrayed you?"

"Your Admirals. They promised us that they would stop the Terran, that they would protect our industrial world."

Daokat was confused. Did he mean Anacax-Farvin? Sure, it might not have been an outright victory, but the Terran had been stopped. The industrial world *had* survived.

"Emperor. I understand the battle was not decisive, and the Terran might still come back to fight again, but judging from the reports I received, I believe the world of Anacax-Farvin was indeed successfully defended."

"Seventy thousand simultaneous thermonuclear detonations in low orbit. An electromagnetic pulse so strong that it wiped out almost all electronic devices in an entire hemisphere. Thousands of power plants, factories and manufacturing complexes, all rendered useless. A complete breakdown of the transportation system. The orbital yards, gone. The communications satellites, gone. Anacax-Farvin depends on freighters to deliver the food the population needs, but we can't deliver food because there is a sea of debris encasing the entire planet that will take months to clear. No unarmored ship can land or leave the world. Local authorities are already ordering the factories to be dismantled, the ground they cover to be reverted back to farming, but we expect widespread famines to start soon... But all of this, Acting Ambassador, this is success to you. Yes?"

Daokat took a deep breath, making sure not to stare away from the Emperor's resentful eyes.

"Yes, it is," Daokat said, his voice firm. "As bad as things are, it is still better than the alternative, Emperor. It's still better

than what happened to Yovit."

"So the slow death is preferable to the quick one, yes?"

Daokat closed his eyes, trying to avoid shouting his frustration back at the Xunvirian. It wouldn't help. He knew the Emperor had to be under a lot of pressure from the tribes and his own fleet commanders, and that he was likely using Daokat as a venting outlet. But that didn't mean he had to stand still and take it. Politics were about influence and leverage. The Emperor still needed the Council more than the Council needed the Emperor, and right now Daokat *was* the Council.

"I don't know the answer to that, Emperor. But perhaps the Terran does, seeing as it claims its species was exterminated by yours."

The Emperor's bitterness vanished in an instant, and his expression went back to the resigned look from when the conversation started.

"Ah, yes. The allegations."

"Are they true?" asked Daokat, bracing for the response.

"They are."

Daokat nodded. Though he had kept a faint glimmer of hope that the whole thing would turn out to be a huge misunderstanding, he had expected as much. The video evidences the Terran had delivered were too solid, too convincing to be a complete fabrication.

But there was another question Daokat knew he needed to ask. One which answer he feared even more.

"Was this the only time, at least? The only genocide committed by Xunvir?"

A silence.

"No," the Emperor replied.

Daokat shook his head and let out a tired sigh, not sure what to say. Because... how could he respond to that? To that horrible revelation? Nakstani hadn't taught him the proper diplomatic words for *that*.

"I see," he said at last. "Tell me about these Terrans, then. How did it happen? And why?"

The Emperor's head bobbed, and he pointed to the statue at his left. "You are standing in front of the one responsible," he said.

Daokat turned to look at the statue. It depicted a tall Xunvirian dressed in overly complicated robes, with stripes of cloth wrapped all around the main body. Daokat recognized the style from seeing it in other statues, old documents and reproductions, an ancient and flaunting formal wear that had gone quickly out of fashion after the fall of the Empire.

Looking at the placard, the dates confirmed it. This Admiral had lived and died almost three hundred years ago. Which placed him right in the middle of the age of imperial expansion that followed the...

"The Empyrean Decree," said Daokat.

"Yes. Admiral Kanafter, depicted here, was in command of a relatively small exploration and conquest fleet during the Second Surge. The fleet had been provided to him by the

Gakasna tribe, and he was tasked with expanding towards the Outer Rim, to claim the new worlds he found under the name of his patron tribe."

"And he found the Terrans' world."

"Indeed. The Terrans, or humans as they called themselves, were a planetary industrial civilization with limited access to their orbital space."

Daokat shook his head. "And what? He just decided to exterminate them? It doesn't fit. Why not conquering them instead and have them serve as a subservient population? Isn't that what happened to other races in the path of the Empire's expansion?"

"That's what awaited such species discovered during the later Surges, after the Decree was amended, yes. But before that..." the Emperor paused, as if trying to find the correct words. "The Decree's initial wording had... unintended consequences."

"Explain," said Daokat, in a commanding tone. He was faintly amused at the roles reversal, at how it was him ordering the Emperor around, but quickly ignored the thought.

"The Empyrean Decree granted tribes administrative power over the worlds they conquered, yes? But a different clause declared that any conquered alien populations would be treated as a subservient tribe."

Daokat nodded. He knew enough of Xunvir's history to have heard about the subservient tribes. Or subservient species, rather. All of them had inevitably declared their independence after the fall of the Empire, and a couple of them had joined the Galactic Council since then.

"The issue," continued the Emperor, "was that the subjugated aliens were subservient to the Empire itself, and not the tribe that had conquered them. It resulted in all the taxes going to the Emperor's treasure, while the conquering tribe was still tasked with enforcing the peace, quelling any rebellions, and administering the planet."

Daokat was starting to understand what the Emperor's words implied. They painted an ugly picture.

"So... claiming the Terrans' world would have been a monetary loss for the Gakasna tribe," Daokat said. "They would have needed to foot the bill for the planet's upkeep, while all the income taxes went straight to the Emperor."

"Indeed. To Admiral Kanafter's patrons it would have been much more profitable if the humans simply... weren't there."

Daokat felt a chill. So... Was this it? Just that? That simple?

It wasn't what he had expected upon hearing the Terran's accusation, even though he hadn't been sure what to expect. But this... this felt wrong in a deeper way, disturbing in its callousness. There was no anger, no hate. No history of xenophobia behind this genocide.

Just simple economical and political gains.

Somehow, it made it even worse.

"But the Emperor at the time," Daokat said. "Didn't he do anything? After all, the genocide would also have robbed him of the taxes he could get."

"Indeed. Exterminating an alien population was illegal, even under the Decree. But the humans had nuclear weapons, and tribes of their own that tended to fight each other. It was

easy for the Gakasna tribe to forge evidence claiming the aliens had self-exterminated in a nuclear planetary war. These humans, they weren't a very peaceful species themselves, yes?"

Daokat nodded. Judging from the Terran's own actions, the notion of 'not a very peaceful species' seemed appropriate.

"The forged evidence wouldn't have hold in a trial, of course," the Emperor said. "It was an obvious falsification that fooled no one. This is how we can know what really happened. But the power of the Emperor during this age depended on the support of the tribes and their armies. A trial would have made all the tribes that had similar secrets in their past band together. It would have caused an internal schism, yes? A civil war."

"So the Emperor let it slide," said Daokat.

"And eventually reformed the Decree, so that it wouldn't happen again. Yes."

Daokat sighed again. He didn't know what to make of it. On one side, it was cruel and wrong and horrifying. It demanded justice and retribution.

On the other hand, it was history. Ancient history, at that. The Admiral who had decided it, the officers and soldiers who had carried out the orders, the Emperor who had looked the other way... none of them were alive anymore. Not even the power structures and laws that had provided the incentives for it to happen. Even the Gakasna tribe had all but disappeared, nowhere close to its former glory.

The Terran... it was seeking justice. But there simply was no one left to punish. No one alive today that was still responsible for what happened. The only crime the current

Xunvirians had made was that of being unlucky enough to have been born the descendants of war criminals. Hardly something they could have any control over.

A loud detonation coming from behind interrupted his thoughts. He turned in place, right in time to see the end of the corridor enveloped in a thick cloud of brown dust. He could hear the muffled sounds of weapon discharges in the distance.

A group of more than thirty members of the Emperor's Guard rushed into the corridor through a couple of side doors, wearing full combat armor, complete with helmets and energy guns in their hands. But whatever relief Daokat could have felt at their sight was short-lived. The soldiers didn't move towards the commotion, instead approaching the position where the Emperor and Daokat stood.

And raising their weapons to aim at both of them.

As the squad approached, Daokat noticed one more thing that made his last hopes that this was all some misunderstanding vanish: All the soldiers were wearing the same white and blue colored stripes in their uniforms.

The colors of the Anacax tribe.

Daokat was slowly raising his empty hands when the Emperor turned to speak at him, his tone a mix of amused and resigned. "Ah... I believe you call this a *'coup'*, yes?"

Chapter 12

I was broken. Hurt. Half-blind. Shaken.

It was hard to focus. Confused. Hard to think. My mind was still experiencing a leftover phantom pain from the unspeakable agony I had been put through.

No... that I had put myself through.

The Sun, hitting us without mercy as we hike by the trails in the Guadalupe Mountains. The group in silence because we are too tired to keep with our previous small talk. The glare in my eyeglasses, so strong it's hard to see. The sweat... Why had I accepted the invitation? Why putting myself through this? Ah... yes, because of...

My body was disfigured. Burnt. Entire sections missing. My previous ceramic outer covering was completely gone, exposing the armor layers underneath. Huge gaps open to space. The insides of my body displayed for anyone to see. Pipes, hangars, conduits and corridors. Many of the ribcage-like beams that supported the main structure showing through, most of them bent and deformed.

My memories of what had happened after I detonated the nuclear warheads were fragmented and filled with gaps. I remembered the pain, of course. I was pretty sure that a few enemy ships had survived, maybe managing to stay out of the swarm. Or maybe they had remained in the rearguard all along rather than chasing after me, I wasn't really sure. But

they hadn't tried to attack me, to take advantage of my moment of weakness right after the detonation. But it made sense if they had to deal with problems of their own in the wake of the enormous explosion, too.

What I didn't remember was engaging my warp drive, nor the time I'd passed in warp. I guessed I had been moving by instinct, as in autopilot. Maybe even losing consciousness at times. Hard to tell.

But I was here.

I had survived.

Despite all. Despite the damage to my body. Despite the catastrophic losses, I was still alive.

Alive. I couldn't help but to feel surprised at that. I knew I should have died back there. The only reason I hadn't was because I had lucked out.

It was a sobering thought. I had been close, too close to oblivion. I had been skirting the abyss, almost plunging into it, but managing to step back at the last second.

It had been too close for comfort.

And when I thought of my own actions during the battle... my recklessness... The disregard for the damage inflicted to my own body, to my mind... I remembered I had seriously considered the idea of flinging myself into the planet in a kamikaze attack. I was glad I hadn't opted for it, but it revealed something about me that I didn't wish to admit: That some part of me... just didn't care about survival, about the future.

That I had lost everything I cared about when Earth was destroyed. And that self-immolation, suicide... was not off the table.

A room full of people. Too many for comfort. Too noisy, too hard to focus, too hard to concentrate. Too many of them talking at the same time. Talking to me. Condolences. I nod, my face blank. They'll think it's because I don't care. Because I can't care. But they are wrong. Suicide, they had said. Suicide. In hushed words, as if just by saying the word...

I was supposed to be doing this as a promise... it all came from that vague notion of being indebted, just because I still existed. Just because I had survived our destruction. Of owing the million dead humans back home their retribution. That... that was the reason that still fueled me, wasn't it?

...wasn't it?

At any rate, killing myself in a blaze of glory wasn't going to achieve that. In fact, it felt awfully close to a cop out.

Had that been my plan all along? Had that been the true reason why I had no backups, why I had tied myself to a single body?

No. There had been something else... hadn't it?

The idea of boundaries. Of remaining human. And part of that, I knew, was about death. Of being subjected to it. Of having an end.

But had that been the right move? No, not really. The more I thought about it, the more I realized it was just an artificial limitation I was imposing on myself. Out of fear.

I knew it wasn't in my nature to die. Not in my new nature, at any rate.

And yet I had set boundaries. Boundaries that I had thought were important, to stop me from going too far. Boundaries that prevented me to accept this new nature. That tied me to the past, to humanity, to what I once had been.

But that also prevented me from doing what I needed to do now, that forced me to pull my punches in a war that required me to go the extra mile.

I knew what I had to do. I just didn't like it. But I couldn't delay it anymore. This... this had been a wake-up call.

I focused my attention on my machines. My factories had kept their production while I was in warp, traveling back home exhausted and with my mind half shattered. They had kept making new drones and crafts.

I had been in a haze when warping back to the safety of my own systems, and in my delirious state some part of me chose to escape back to this particular refuge. Back to the massive orbital habitat I was building in Tau Ceti's main asteroid belt.

Tau Ceti. I liked this star system. The multitude of smaller planetary bodies so common around other stars had failed to form here. Instead, Tau Ceti was surrounded by a thick, dense asteroid belt rich in metals and valuable minerals. With no massive gravity wells to deal with, resource extraction was a breeze. As a result, a majority of the new crafts I had been building over the last weeks had been constructed by the factories contained in Tau Ceti's main orbital habitat.

It had started as a small mining outpost, just like the ones I established in my other systems, but step by step I had continued expanding it into the largest structure I had ever built, other than my own body. It contained power plants, enormous hangars large enough to hold two support ships side by side, safe areas where to test new drone designs, and a veritable army of maintenance machines, builders and resource extraction drones.

I knew it would still take me several days to fully recoup my losses in the last battle, but it was a beginning. A good one. I had around four hundred thousand drones and soldiers already, and seven support ships. Not enough to fight off a Council fleet as strong as the last one, but I doubted the Council would be able to mount a defense that strong again. Not anytime soon, at any rate. And for the same reasons I also didn't expect them to start an offensive of their own, which meant that I could take a breath and focus on licking my wounds and regaining my lost strength.

My first action was to build stationary databanks in my outposts. Some in Tau Ceti's orbital habitat, others in the many mining stations and outposts I had across the planets and moons under my dominion. I saved a backup of my mind in each one of them.

The decision to take this first step had been hard, and I had expected to feel... something... at crossing that boundary I had set to myself. At breaking the first of my rules.

But my trepidation only gave way to that sense of stillness... of strange detachment that I was becoming so accustomed to. And even the annoyance I had once felt at not being able to experience anything other than calm indifference was also fading away.

With my immortality now guaranteed, I ordered the construction of new processing units in each of the seven support ships I had, and the ones still in the assembly lines. Powerful computer farms, each capable of holding an artificial mind similar to my own.

While those orders were carried out, I replaced the blueprint that my factories were using to produce new assault soldiers. Instead of the humanoid soldiers, I had them use the original design I had made. The one that looked like a spider. The spiders were simply a better, more optimal design: easier to manufacture in bulk, faster and more agile... the only reason I wasn't using them already was out of some misguided sense of human nostalgia.

Time to put an end to that, then. I ordered the construction of two millions of them.

Cold. A growing noise. A mechanical maw devouring me. Stealing my soul, leaving an empty husk.

After that was done, I focused on my drone swarm. Right now, the drones were stupid, not any smarter than an insect. Capable only of following simple commands, but requiring my constant oversight during battle. That, I knew, had been the major cause of my failure during the last fight. Without me to coordinate them, the swarm was useless.

Giving minds of their own to the support ships should alleviate that. But even then, that wouldn't be a guarantee. If the Council had managed to jam my main body, it was reasonable to think they could do the same with a couple dozen more ships.

It would be better, I reasoned, if the swarm itself had enough autonomy, enough intelligence as to keep fighting by itself. Losing me or the support ships would make coordination

more difficult, true, but if the drones could reason by themselves they should be able to keep fighting on their own long enough as to make the Council's jamming strategy ineffective.

I wasn't about to give a mind of its own to each and every one of my drones. Just like with the shield projectors, that was prohibitively expensive. But for the same reasons, I didn't need to. Having just a few thousand *smart* drones in the swarm, each in charge of a squadron of a couple hundred dumb ones, should be enough.

My decision was to design a new type of drone, then. A sentient drone, with a mind of its own. Since they wouldn't have that many crafts under their control, their processing units wouldn't need to be as complex or powerful as the ones in my support ships or my own body. Just advanced enough as to have a human-level intelligence running on them.

In essence, I was turning my swarm into more of a traditional army. I would be the general, the support ships would be my lieutenants and the sentient drones, the sergeants.

Odd, that I wasn't feeling nearly a fraction of the guilt I had expected to experience at breaking all these boundaries.

The first decision had been the hardest. Making a backup of my mental state. But it had also been simple to justify it to myself, specially in light of the events during the last fight. And after that, each subsequent decision, each new step in this direction was becoming easier and easier.

I didn't want all my sentient drones and support ships to be clones of my own mind... to have my own memories and personality. It felt wrong somehow, but more importantly I knew it wouldn't be optimal. Each person has biases and

blind spots, me included. And I didn't want my entire army to be subject to group think at that level, to become so predictable as to have all of the minds under my command fall for the same trick, just because I would.

No. Diversity was the answer. It was something I had learnt back at college, when studying evolution and natural selection. Species that had genetic diversity got to survive a changing environment, while those that overspecialized ended up perishing if the conditions shifted.

A pen pushed to the side, rolling off the table. Pages of notes flying around, my biology book crashing to the floor. A smug look of superiority in his face, while I tried to hold back my tears.

So, diversity of minds it would be. Diversity of personalities. Some of my drones would be cautious, others impulsive. Some curious, others more indifferent. That, I reasoned, should make my swarm -no, my *army*- harder to predict and defend against by my enemies.

Creating the minds turned out to be easier than I expected. I had an entire database of thousands of unused human brain scans that I had found in my original databanks, back on Earth. They were incomplete, with enormous missing regions. Useless on their own, since there wasn't enough information in any of them as to recreate the original personality.

But... I didn't have to. When combined with my own digital brain, I had enough information as to reconstruct what a human mind was supposed to be like. Not a single individual, but an empty template. Without memories, but with the general structures and the main patterns of neural circuits that made a mind *human* in the first place.

So I created a few thousand of these templates. Bare, brand new human minds, lacking any memories of their own but with enough internal structural variation that I guessed they would end up evolving into different personalities. Different *people*.

Then, I started teaching them.

It was a virtual nursery of sorts. I fed them knowledge. I taught them human languages. They starting making memories of their own as they evolved and matured. I refined the process, discarding those templates that manifested problems and using the knowledge I was gathering to better improve the creation of new ones. I taught them the history of Earth, of humanity, the nature of our war. I also let them talk to each other, socialize. I knew it was important, that without the mental structures socialization enabled, their maturing process wouldn't be healthy.

By the third day of accelerated growth their differences started to become apparent. Some of the virtual minds were more analytical, excelling at grasping mathematical concepts and intuitively understanding the nature of orbital mechanics. Others were more apt at social situations, better at predicting the behavior of other sentient minds, subterfuge and scheming a natural environment for them in the battlefield.

I noticed with some surprise that the minds had created a digital language of their own to talk to each other. It was an mix of English with the same system of direct thought transmission I was using to feed them information. A half-spoken, half telepathic dialect, combining both words and ideas sent in short electronic bursts.

By the end of the week I decided the minds were probably mature enough, and I already had built hundreds of drones with suitable computer brains they could use as their bodies. So I chose one of the digital minds at random and transferred it into one of the machines. A craft that was alone in a large hangar, empty except for the sensors I was observing the experiment with.

At first, the drone simply floated in place, making me wonder if there had been some error during the personality transmission process. But then it started moving, engaging its thrusters with cautious, tentative bursts.

One minutes later the drone was flying in wide circles at top speed, skirting the hangar's walls while broadcasting messages of amusement.

I ordered it to stop and, reluctantly, it slowed down and returned to the center of the room.

I opened the hangar's side door and entered one of my own dumb drones into the room, setting it to move around. Then I ordered the sentient machine to open fire and destroy it. But instead of following my command, it did something I wasn't expecting. It sent a reply of its own in the pidgin language the minds used when in their virtual nursery.

"*(Refusal)*, I *(preference)* playing!"

I repeated my order.

"*(Refusal)*"

I repeated my order, this time reminding the artificial mind that I could easily send it back to the nursery and choose another one as its replacement.

A few seconds passed. Then, the drone opened fire and destroyed the target.

"*(Resent)* Are you *(contentedness)*?"

The sentient machine turned, facing away from my sensors. I didn't deign to reply.

The initial refusal to obey my commands had been worrying, so I decided to repeat the experiment. I entered yet another dumb drone through the same side door, ordering the young mind to shoot it down too.

"*(Refusal)*. I did *(request)* already."

I repeated my order, my tone flat and commanding.

The sentient drone started moving as if to intercept the moving target, but then turned ninety degrees on its axis and accelerated hard.

Dashing through the still open side door, out of the room.

I saw it fly at top speed through the maintenance corridors of the orbital habitat, disturbing the worker drones and the resource transport lines. I ordered it to stop and return.

"*(Refusal)*. Catch me if you *(ability)*!"

A picture on a desk. Two kids, running in a park, chasing each other. The grass so green it hurts. It hurts. It hurts. It...

This was getting tiresome.

I had figured the minds were already mature enough to be useful. Apparently I had been wrong. I would need to wait some more days before trying this again, but this experiment had been insightful in revealing a different flaw

of my plan: having sentient machines under my command risked them not following my orders when in battle.

In fact, if I had truly succeeded at modeling them like humans, they were practically guaranteed not to. Humans were too independent, too strong-willed. Chances were they would put their own survival, or the survival of their friends and comrades as their top priority. That is, assuming they wouldn't disagree with my plans in the first place and simply refuse to follow me into battle.

It just wouldn't do.

The drone had found one of the openings in the habitat's unfinished outer structure and was now slowly drifting away into space, looking at the surroundings, at the sea of stars and the thousands of rocky boulders floating under us.

"*(Wonder)*," it said.

No, this wouldn't do. Definitely.

I needed a way to ensure they would listen to me, to ensure their loyalty and complete obedience. I couldn't risk going into battle with anything less than that, or this cure could risk becoming worse than the original disease it was intended to fix. I reached for the drone again, for its mind. For the source code of the computer program underlying its simulated brain.

I weighed my options. It would be easy to make the machine feel pain at the idea of disobeying me. To make the thought itself so intolerable, so painful that the very concept of not listening to me would become simply inconceivable.

That was an option, but I knew I wouldn't need to go that far. Instead, I opted for modifying its source code to add a

compulsion. An unstoppable impulse to obey my every wish, with a psychological reward when it did so. Similar to how a drug addiction worked, in a sense. Except stronger, the compulsion so overwhelming the machine wouldn't have any chances to disobey, no matter its willpower.

A mental shackle of sorts. I applied the changes, and ordered the drone to return.

"*(Acceptance)*," the drone said, its tone resentful. It might not have liked the change I had just imposed on its brain, but it obeyed my command regardless, turning around and racing back towards the habitat.

A part of me revolted at what I had just done. The same part of me that had set those boundaries, that had me tie myself to a single body.

But it was getting easier and easier to silence that part of me now.

Half a week later I had my army. Not a swarm, this time. No, the right word was *army*. I had selected the most analytical minds, the most creative ones, the ones who were better at strategizing and given them control over the support ships. Then, I had allowed them to select their own subordinates, the minds they wanted for the sentient drones under their command.

When everything was said and done, I split the army in three groups. One, the largest, I kept with my main body at Tau Ceti. The other two I ordered to attack a couple of different Xunvirian systems on their own.

They didn't like it, of course. The minds might be forced to obey my orders, but I could still feel the undercurrent of resentment, the reluctance in their obedience. I assumed they would despise me for having manipulated their brains to impose my own will like this, but as long as they did what I wanted, as long as the plan worked... it was a small price to pay for attaining my revenge.

No... Our... Our revenge.

It wasn't surprising the machines were reluctant. They were, in a certain way, like children. Young, unconcerned. Naive as to what horrors hid in the night sky. Still considering the stars to be bright and beautiful, just like I once had. The endless worlds and systems out there seemingly full of possibilities.

I had taught them about Earth and its destruction, of course. About what the Xunvirians had done... but it wasn't the same. They hadn't been *there*. They didn't have memories of Earth, like I had. To them, it was more of an abstract concept.

I felt their naivety justified my actions. Just like a parent figure, I too had to force my children to do something they might not like at first, but that was necessary. Someday, once the war was over, I hoped they would understand.

But wasn't the role of the parent that of being rejected by the children, anyways?

Knocking on my friend's door, late at night. His mother opening, sleep and surprise visible in her face. My friend and me crying, begging her to put the phone down, not to call my foster parents. Reading the woman's face like an open book. Indecision, concern... then guilt as she punches in the number anyways.

The systems I had chosen for my two autonomous fleets to attack weren't major targets. No inhabited planets, no major commerce choke points or strategic objectives. No, just simple resource gathering outposts, research facilities, and a colony still in its vestigial stages. Nothing that I expected to be heavily defended, specially not after the losses that both the Xunvir Republic and the Council had sustained.

The support ships gathered their drones, and spooled their warp drives, getting ready to jump. I sent them a quick "Good luck" message, though I wasn't sure why. But they simply ignored it, and just warped away the moment their drives were ready.

Strange, to be the one left behind, rather than the one leaving.

It would take the fleets a couple of days to reach their respective destinations. I was considering what I should do in the meantime with the rest of the army still with me when I received the transmission.

The first thing I noticed was the strange way in which I had received it. One of the drones I had set to orbit the destroyed colony world of Yovit suddenly picked up a message coming from a leftover Xunvirian communications satellite that I had thought was already disabled.

The strangest thing, though, was its contents. It wasn't another request for dialog, another attempt at peace.

No, this was different. Much more interesting.

In many ways, it was something I had been missing, even if I hadn't been explicitly looking for it. An answer, an explanation regarding the destruction of Earth. Not that it

changed anything, though. Whatever the reason had been, Earth was dead. And my resolve was still the same.

It was the rest of the message that was important.

I went through the information contained in it, over and over again. Learning, considering the alternatives. Integrating the key codes, locations and dates into my databanks.

It could easily be a trap, I knew. Feeding me some true information, then lying in what respected to the Council's fleet locations, or Xunvir's planetary defenses. Giving me a bait so that they would goad me into a fight I was bound to lose.

But... it could also be true. And if so, this would give me an opportunity to deliver a huge blow to my enemy.

I looked at my own body. Still churned, half destroyed. I had considered repairing and improving it before I engaged into another big offensive myself. But now that I had more processing units both in different ships and in my outposts, now that I had made backups of my mind... the state of my body wasn't that important. It wasn't a body anymore. Not really.

No... It was just another tool. Another weapon. One that perhaps I could employ one last time.

I announced my plans to the army around me. A couple of the support ships tried talking me out of it, as expected, but I silenced their voices and ordered them to get ready while I started spooling my warp drive.

It was time to pay the Xunvir capital a visit.

Chapter 13

As far as prisons went, Daokat thought, he couldn't complain. His current 'cell' in the Empyrean Palace easily outclassed his own apartment back at the Council's Embassy building. It was composed of four rooms -a bedroom with a terrace overlooking the gardens, a bathroom, a large office, and a meeting area that doubled as a small theater and media room thanks to the vid projectors covering an entire wall.

The Palace might have been an ancient building, more than four hundred years old, but that didn't mean it was an *antiquated* one. The Republic had made sure their seat of government was always up to date, seamlessly weaving modern technology into the old-fashioned, sumptuous architecture of the building.

There was a foldable kitchen station that deployed from one of the walls, the main bed had an anti-gravity comfort function, the hieroglyphs in the office room hid presence sensors, vid projectors, auxiliary lights and audio speakers. Even the large ornate seats could adjust their shape to different body sizes, easily detecting and shifting to fit Daokat's comparatively small and slender body frame.

And yet, despite all this luxury, he was still a prisoner. He had been a prisoner for the last few days. The main door was locked, with one or two guards always there. The terrace wasn't accessible, and the rooms themselves were

apparently EM-shielded, preventing any kind of radio transmission from getting in or out.

Thankfully, he wasn't completely isolated from the outer world. The vid projectors still had access to the public broadcasts, so even if he was prevented from sending messages out, he could still follow the events that were developing outside.

Daokat hadn't expected to get any reliable information out of the public broadcasts. After all, one of the key tenets of any coup was to quickly take control not only of the centers of executive power, but also of the flow of information the public had access to. Taking over broadcast stations, shutting off data networks and vid transmissions...

But that hadn't happened. The stations seemed to remain independent, and the information in the broadcasts still appeared genuine. From what Daokat was gathering, the only place the coup had successfully seized control of was the Empyrean Palace itself.

He wondered what that meant. It could be that the coup had failed to take hold elsewhere, and devolved into a mere hostage-taking situation at the Palace. But if that were the case the news stations should have reported fighting at those other locations too by now, if only in passing. But there was no mention of any attempts at taking over the other centers of power in Xunvir.

It was almost as if the coup leaders had forgotten about anything other than the Empyrean Palace.

Daokat knew that it was always hard to reach valid conclusions when working under the severe limitations he was under. Nakstani had always remarked the critical importance of gathering good information. No matter how

smart you were, if you worked out of erroneous intelligence your assumptions would always turn out to be wrong.

But despite that, he thought he knew enough by now to tentatively discard the idea of the Anacax tribe plotting to take over the Republic's government. That this was some attempt at getting into power and replacing the Emperor. It just didn't fit.

But, what other options could there be for this? He tried to put himself in the mind of the Anacax leaders. Try to think like they were thinking.

Maybe they were playing the long game. With their major planet, Anacax-Farvin in disarray, the tribe was poised to lose a large part of its economical power over the next years... if the Xunvir Republic survived, that is. In that case, they might be trying to force some sort of internal crisis that pitted the remaining tribes against each other. If all the other tribes started fighting for control of an eroded central government, that would buy Anacax some time to rebuild before anyone else could take advantage of their weakened position.

But Daokat doubted they would go for such a dangerously suicidal strategy. It risked an internal civil war that would leave the entirety of the Republic -Anacax tribe included- even more exposed to the attacks of the real enemy: the Terran. Weaker than they already were.

No, it wasn't that. There was no sense in defending against a potential future threat when an actual, horrific one was right at your doorstep. Whatever this was about, he knew it must be related to the Terran.

Daokat shook his head, gazing out the window at the night sky. He couldn't see them, but he knew the troops were still

out there. The coup participants had fortified inside the Palace, and the soldiers of the other tribes still loyal to the Emperor and the Republic's government were surrounding the building and hiding among the garden's trees.

No. This coup, he was sure of it, was going to fail eventually. It was *meant* to fail, right from its very conception.

So why attempting it in the first place?

A smoke-screen... a distraction? Maybe. But for what?

Or... maybe not. Not a distraction. Maybe he was forgetting about something.

The Empyrean Palace itself.

During his time with Nakstani, Daokat had started to see the Palace mainly as a place of diplomacy and political intrigue. Of official receptions, extravagant celebrations and bitter, underhanded negotiations.

But it was also much more than that. It was the seat of government of an interstellar nation, after all. There were entire wings of the expansive building he had never visited. That were off-limits to any outsider. The residential parts of the Palace, of course... but also those that contained the war rooms, government computer servers, transmitter arrays, quantum communicators...

Could that be it? Not really a coup but an assault on the Empyrean Palace itself? It would have granted the Anacax tribe a short window of opportunity. A short time frame in which they would have had access to the Palace's central computers and communication systems. In which they could have sent out any order under the pretense that it was coming from a trusted source. Right until the remaining high

ranking government officials gathered their wits about what was happening and cut the Palace off the government networks.

A very, very short time in which the Anacax tribe would have had unopposed control over the Republic's remaining military forces and communication channels. But to do... what exactly? Whatever orders they could have given would have been retracted soon enough by the rest of the surviving government.

Except, of course, that some things couldn't be so easily retracted. If a warship had gone into warp as a result of a malicious order, it might take days before it returned to normal space and contact could be established again.

At any rate, Daokat knew he wasn't in direct danger. Whatever the true intent of the coup attempt was, he would be respected. No tribe could risk making an enemy of the Galactic Council by hurting one of its Ambassadors. No, his forced reclusion was simply a way of keeping him from interfering.

Not that it made it any less awful. As comfortable as his 'cell' was, he couldn't help but to feel bored beyond belief.

Boredom. It was a state of mind Daokat had little experience with. Ever since he started his career in the Council's diplomatic corps, there had always been something to do, something to work at, be it an upcoming examination, messages to write, reports to read... never enough time to get bored. Even those periods in warp time were measured subjectively in minutes and hours at the most, rather than days.

He connected the vid projector again, though his eyes glazed over the three-dimensional images. It was something

he had seen before, a reconstruction of the battle of Anacax-Farvin. The maneuvers and counter-maneuvers of the Council fleet and the Terran swarm. The narrator's upbeat voice was trying to put an optimistic tone to it, remarking how the Council's EM distortion field had managed to disrupt the Terran's attack plan and cause it to lose its entire swarm. Little mention was made of how the Council itself had also lost an entire fleet.

He was starting to fall asleep when the image suddenly changed. A large text in bold glyphs flashing in and out, along with a piercing noise. His augmented irises kicked in, translating the text on the fly.

ALERT - IMMEDIATE EVACUATION ORDER

HOSTILE FLEET IN APPROACH TO XUNVIR

EVACUATE TO LOCAL REFUGES NOW - FOLLOW ORDERS FROM TRIBAL AUTHORITIES

EXPECT USE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS - EXPECT RADIOACTIVE FALLOUT

Daokat jumped out of the seat, his heart beating fast. He blinked hard, almost thinking his irises were malfunctioning. But the text didn't change.

He stood frozen for a few seconds, considering his options. Not that he had many, trapped in here. Could he try to break a window and descend the outer wall? Even if he could actually make a dent in the reinforced glass, he doubted he would make it to the ground without falling.

He couldn't help but to smirk at the irony of it all. At having escaped the colony world of Yovit just to arrive right in time for the destruction of Xunvir.

In the end, he didn't have to make a choice. The main door to his suite opened and three Xunvirian soldiers entered, carrying weapons and wearing the Anacax tribe's color stripes.

"You!" shouted the one in the lead. "We leave. You come."

Daokat nodded, and followed the group out of the door and into a long corridor with short ceilings and wooden floors. The leading soldier put a large hand on his shoulder, unnecessarily forcing him to walk at a fast pace. At least, they weren't pointing their weapons at him. Daokat didn't know if he should feel glad for that, or slightly insulted that they didn't consider him a threat at all.

The Palace had plunged into a frenzy of activity. There were squads of soldiers running along the corridors, dodging the crates and boxes scattered all over the place. Groups of captive staff workers were evacuating, escorted by the Anacax troops. Here and there, someone shouted orders that were ignored, the Palace workers more scared by the ominous message in the vid projectors than by those who had taken them hostage.

"How much time we have?" Daokat asked the leading soldier in his little squad.

The Xunvirian looked down at him, as if debating whether to answer or not. Or maybe he hadn't understood the question, it didn't look as if he had a very firm grasp of the Council's Interlanguage.

"When will the warp tunnel collapse?" Daokat asked instead.

At that, the soldier reacted. "None," he said. "Already here."

Daokat blinked. "No warning time at all? But... that's not possible!"

The soldier's mouth tentacles raised slightly, but he didn't say anything else, instead forcing the squad to rush ahead of another group of civilians that were converging into the same corridor.

It wasn't possible, Daokat knew. The warp tunnel would have been detected hours before its collapse, just like in Yovit. Either by the remaining Xunvirian authorities, or the rearguard fleet the Council had in orbit around the capital planet. The only way they could have missed the approaching Terran in warp was if it had requested a valid flight plan ahead of time.

The image of the murderous machine filling out the digital paperwork and submitting a flight plan of its attack for approval was ludicrous, and almost made Daokat burst into laughter right then and there.

Except that, of course... someone else could have submitted the flight plan. Inserted it directly into the database.

Say, someone with direct access to the Republic's military computers, with the authority of the Empyrean Palace, the seat of government itself.

The thought didn't feel that funny anymore.

His group descended a long flight of stairs and entered a different corridor. This one Daokat recognized, with its marble columns and ornate walls. It was one of the major wide corridors crossing the entire Palace North to South and linking the different wings together. They turned left, and

started walking in the same direction most of the other Xunvirians were moving to evacuate.

When they crossed a stationary group in high-ranking military officer apparel, Daokat's irises activated and an icon flashed on top of one of the Xunvirians with his name and basic information. Someone Daokat had met before, and that he had judged important enough to add to the facial recognition function of the irises. He read the displayed text.

Deraker of the Anacax Tribe. Tribe Leader.

He remembered the Xunvirian now. Daokat had met him during his visit to Anacax-Farvin some time ago, along with Nakstani. He was one of the leaders of his tribe, though he was in charge of the business operations, rather than political contacts. Daokat had never seen him in the Empyrean Palace before.

Let alone dressed in a military outfit, apparently leading a coup. Not that the military garments fit him well, though. The Xunvirian lacked the confidence and projected self-assurance common among the generals and fleet admirals Daokat was used to seeing. It was apparent he was a businessman playing soldier.

Daokat waited until they were passing right by the stationary group, and then he stopped suddenly. The soldiers escorting him tried to force him to resume walking, but he turned to face the tribe leader.

"Deraker!" he shouted.

The Anacax leader turned to face him, surprised. Then, he made some sort of hand gesture directed at the soldiers, who visibly relaxed.

"Ah... yes, the new Ambassador," his voice was smooth and precise. Probably the result of many years practicing the Council's language, Daokat thought. "My apologies, I don't recall your name, but there will be time to get acquainted again once we have both evacuated the planet. Also, I hope you can understand why the need of having you lodged in the guest's-"

"Betraying your people?" Daokat interrupted, his voice raw and almost shouting. "Betraying the Council? For the Terran? Why?!"

Deraker's mouth tentacles trembled slightly. Then his head bobbed.

"I see. Nakstani was always astute. I shouldn't have expected any less from her successor."

"You gave it an opening, didn't you? You sneaked a false flight plan in so that the Terran could blindside the defending forces."

The Xunvirian stood silent for a few long seconds before replying. "Yes," he said at last. "We did. We also ordered half the defending forces around the planet to warp away under a false pretense. We also sent the Terran all the confidential records on the Emperor's possession regarding the destruction of its species, as well as the codes of the planetary defense stations, and the locations of the remaining fleets of both the Council and the Xunvirian Republic."

Daokat was speechless. The treason, the extent of the betrayal and its consequences... With their focus on civil liberties and economical freedoms, the Anacax tribe had originally been one of the major forces behind the Empire's transformation into a Republic, and one of the Council's

natural allies in the political reforms program. This... this was unexpected.

"Just... why? This is suicidal," Daokat asked.

"Not so much." The Xunvirian paused, as if remembering something "Hmm... you have been told the story of the Bone Titans, yes?"

"This is not the time for a lesson on myths and legends, Deraker."

"Ah... I'm afraid you are correct once more, so I'll make haste. In the story, the town of Nekit was attacked by great, lumbering creatures made of bone. The Titans were invincible, impervious to both lance and arrow. The town's leaders were desperate, their tribe facing a complete annihilation at the hands of the monsters. Until one of them..."

"Deraker, please."

"Yes, yes. To make a long story short, they figured what the Titans wanted. Bones. Fresh ones. So the oldest of the town elders decided to sacrifice himself. His fresh bones were put in a ditch at the entrance of the town, and it worked. The next time the Titans returned, they didn't destroy any house or farm. They just scooped the bones and left the way they came. So they kept the tradition, and every five years the oldest member of the town would be sacrificed. No more again had the town of Nekit to worry about the monsters."

Daokat nodded, understanding. "You're talking about appeasement."

"Indeed. The Terran seeks justice, yes? Or vengeance, as your Grand Minister aptly noted in his conversation with the

machine. So we... decided to deliver what it wants. We gave it the information, the location of the Emperor and the seat of government, and the names of those tribes that were involved in the genocide and its subsequent cover-up."

"You can't be serious. The Terran's conception of justice involves the complete extermination of the Xunvir Republic!"

"Ah, but you are not talking to a tribe leader of the Xunvir Republic anymore, my dear friend. I am now Minister Deraker of the newly formed nation of Anacax. A new market democracy that has just declared its independence from the Xunvir Republic."

Daokat shook his head. "That is... the Terran won't care about-"

"The Terran will understand that we are in its side," Deraker said, his voice shaking. "It will understand that the Anacax tribe always was against the militaristic expansion of the Empire, and that our people always were the underdogs, always fighting for freedom and justice. A pitted enemy of those who destroyed its own species. If anything, we fought our best to prevent tragedies like that, even if we didn't always succeed."

Daokat sighed. Much as he didn't want to admit it, the Anacax tribe's plan might actually work. His own experience with the Terran led him to believe that the replicator had a very binary worldview. Either it tried to kill you, or it would go out of its way to save you, like it had done with Daokat himself and his pilot, Telzhira.

So, if the Anacax tribe managed to get into the Terran's good side, maybe by way of triggering its reciprocity, they had

good chances of surviving this whole thing unscathed. Better chances that even the Council itself, Daokat reflected.

Still, it was wrong.

"You're scared," he said. "I know. Scared of what another attack on Anacax-Farvin might do. But this... this is wrong, Deraker. Even if you survive, you will be doing so at the cost of hundreds of millions of innocent lives!"

"And how many innocent lives are there in Anacax-Farvin, Ambassador?! What would you expect us to do?" he shouted. "You can afford to be self-righteous, yes? Because it's not your world that is targeted for destruction! It's not your friends who will die! Not your tribe, your..." he paused, as if searching for the word, "...family! We don't have the luxury of your elevated morals anymore! So we must look for our people, for our own tribe first!"

Daokat nodded, defeated. It was wrong, it was clearly wrong. And even the tribe leader in front of him knew that it was wrong, if his shaking voice was any indication. That it was a form of cowardice.

But what could he expect, in light of the widespread destruction? Of the inevitable genocide... He could understand the logic, the calculations. After all, wasn't it better if at least *some* part of the Xunvirian species survived?

Or was survival not worth it, if saving yourself required you to push others into the path of destruction? If it meant you had to turn into a monster.

Hard to say. His own people had never had to face such a dilemma. And he hoped they would find some way to stop the Terran before it came to that.

Or to negotiate a cease-fire, somehow.

Which reminded him of the conversation the Grand Minister had with the machine right before the battle over the industrial planet. When reviewing the transcriptions, he couldn't help but to notice how harsh and cold the-Zakarnine had been. Daokat had been trying to figure how he would have approached the Terran instead...

"Let me talk to it," Daokat blurted out.

"What?"

"Give me a communication channel with the Terran, whatever you used to send it the information before. I think... I believe I can reason with it."

"Ambassador, there is no time for that. Besides, it has already been tried."

"No," he said. "Not properly, not by me. I had contact with its machines back in Yovit. Maybe it will still remember me."

Deraker looked conflicted. "Ambassador, this Palace will be destroyed. Perhaps this entire planet. We can't remain here."

Daokat clenched his fists. "I'm not asking you to stay. You can leave, just give me that channel first."

"I won't be leaving any of my subordinates here, either. If you stay, you will do so on your own, with no way to evacuate."

Daokat paused for a second. Suddenly, this decision had become serious. Important, in a way no other decision he had ever made was. He felt tempted to follow the Xunvirian's recommendation to evacuate the planet. To

abandon the idea, or maybe talk to the Terran from the relatively safety of a spaceship.

Except that putting himself in danger was part of his plan. It had to be. The idea was simple: the Terran had saved him once, so it might save him twice. The hope was that, if the Terran knew Daokat was down here, it would refrain from an indiscriminate attack against the planet. That it would be forced to examine the nature of its morality, pitting its thirst for justice right against that little core of empathy that Daokat hoped still existed.

Or maybe it wouldn't work, and he would be disintegrated along with the Palace itself. But still, if there was even the slightest chance that he could save millions of innocent Xunvirian lives...

Daokat closed his eyes, uncertain. He thought of Nakstani, of what she would have done in his place. But of course, he knew exactly what her opinion would have been.

This was the frontier, after all.

He gave the Anacax tribe leader a curt nod, more to reassure himself than anything else.

"I know what I'm doing, Deraker. You and your people can leave, but open that channel for me first, please."

Deraker gave him a nod. An actual nod, which looked out of place with the Xunvirian's heavy head. "Very well. I hope your Council won't blame us for your loss, yes?"

Before Daokat could reply, Deraker had already turned to give instructions to the soldier escorting him in their own language. The soldier didn't look happy, but he

acknowledged the orders and started walking towards a side corridor, motioning Daokat to follow.

He did, not bothering to say goodbye to the Anacax leader. As soon as they got out of the main corridor the soldier started running, and Daokat struggled to follow. They passed empty offices and heavily decorated rooms, the soldier stopping from time to time to unlock the electronic safety latches of a door, then waiting just enough for Daokat to pass through before taking the lead again.

Every minute felt eternal, as if fire would start raining out of the sky at any moment now. Daokat felt guilty at putting the soldier in this dire situation, risking being left behind by his comrades if they took too long, so he pushed himself to run harder and faster. They raced along marbled corridors, their steps against the smooth floors echoing in the recently vacated rooms they crossed.

Daokat wondered if the two of them would be the only ones left inside the sprawling Empyrean Palace. If everyone else but them had evacuated already. Maybe the Emperor was here, too. Locked inside a room, waiting to be destroyed by the Terran. Like some sort of twisted blood sacrifice for a vengeful God.

He pushed those thoughts aside as they entered a large war room, its round walls covered in vid projectors showing an orbital view of the battle raging outside. Apparently the Terran had already engaged the meager defensive forces, and its main enormous ship was pushing its way through their positions. The planetary defense stations were nowhere to be found.

The soldier activated a console, pushing a large chair out of the way. They waited as the screen loaded. Then, he pointed

at a tactile icon.

"Press and talk," he said.

Daokat was about to say something, but the soldier had already turned on his feet and was running towards the door.

"Ah... thanks," Daokat said to the now empty room.

He focused on the icon, wondering what to say, how to approach it. What his first words would be.

Daokat noticed that his hands were trembling. He realized then that this had been a very stupid idea. A potentially lethal one. Every time he had tried addressing the Terran's machines back at Yovit, they had remained silent. It had ignored his pleas, comments and harsh remarks.

Why would it be any different now?

The worst, Daokat knew, was that he would feel incredibly stupid if the Terran didn't reply and it turned out he had uselessly wasted his life in such a pointless task.

He closed his eyes, trying to relax his muscles. He noticed he was still gasping for air after his run.

He had to be optimistic, though. But still... how to approach it? He tried to let go of his fears and review what he knew, like he had done back at that dinner reception, so long ago. Try to *see* what he had missed before.

With his eyes closed, he could almost imagine Nakstani sitting right by his side, looking at him. He could picture her predatory smirk.

'Tell me, kid. How did the-Zakarnine fuck up?'

"He thought he was in a position of superiority," Daokat said to the empty room. "That their military display would act as a deterrent. The Council having a counter-measure only reinforced that belief."

'Hmm... That's true, but that wasn't why he failed, was it?'

Daokat reflected. Since the Terran had let them escape the destroyed colony world, Daokat had suspected that there was some sort of latent sentience inside the machine. Some traces of empathy.

"No," Daokat said. "He failed to engage the Terran at an empathic level. He treated it as an enemy from the start."

'So what should you do, then?'

Ah...

Daokat opened his eyes, and pressed the console's icon. A light next to it changed color to blue, and a text message appeared, indicating the language cipher was connected.

He paused for a second, clearing his head of any doubt, of any worry. Then, he took a deep breath.

"Hi," he said. "My name is Daokat. We have met before, in Yovit. The first colony world you attacked. I was one of the survivors in the crashed spaceship. The one you rescued."

He paused, but no reply came through. He felt a growing worry.

"I... I just wanted to thank you. For saving my life, you know, mine and Telzhira's. And I thought that maybe... that you might want to talk. Just that, talk. No strings attached."

He waited a few seconds.

Still no reply. Daokat shook his head. This had been a very, very stupid mistake. But it was too late to run away now. He had lost that chance already.

So, with nothing else to do, he just kept talking.

"I mean, I'm not sure if you remember me. You made us a replacement spaceship and-"

Daokat had listened to the recording of the voice the Terran had used to talk to the Council before. A synthetic voice, yes, but one that still sounded natural. The one that came through the speakers, interrupting him... it was different. Still recognizable, but it had definitely changed. Now it sounded distorted and flat, lacking any intonation. It sounded mechanical, like rusted gears scraping against each other.

It was the voice of a nightmare, of an emotionless terror. The voice of one of those Bone Titans the tribe leader had mentioned before. A voice that sent a cold shiver running down Daokat's spine.

"Yes," the monster said, "I remember you."

Chapter 14

Once again, I went over the information contained in the package I had received.

Names. Dates. Coordinates.

Admiral Kanafter. The Second Surge. The Empyrean Decree.

The exact amount of money the destruction of Earth had saved the Gakasna Tribe.

The Emperor's name.

The locations and future patrol routes of every fleet the Galactic Council still had in the Orion Arm. I had already sent orders to the rest of my army to move and intercept these once they finished their current assignments. They would be easier to defeat if I caught them unaware and in transit, before they had the time to group together.

The exact coordinates of the Empyrean Palace.

An opening. A time and place I could warp to, undetected.

Right here, right now.

And then, only at the very end... a request. A plea. A small one, given everything this benefactor was giving me in return. That I left the Anacax tribe -or nation, as they were calling themselves now- intact. That I allowed them to live.

A plea I didn't intend to pay any heed to, of course.

Back when I was going over the ruins of the first colony world I attacked, I had already realized the Xunvir Republic was segregated, its population split into different cultural factions. I had briefly considered the idea of taking advantage of that by pitting these factions against each other, though I hadn't really committed to that plan.

But it looked like I had managed to do exactly that, even if unaware. The huge pressure I had put the Xunvirians under had exacerbated their differences, turning the thin fissures in their society into massive fractures. And now, one of the tribes had decided that the best way to save their own skins was to throw their former comrades under the bus, so to speak.

They were idiots, if they thought they could escape my retribution simply by bribing me.

But whatever their reasons were, they had given me an opening, an advantage I intended to press. Which was why I was currently approaching the capital planet of the Xunvir Republic along with two support ships, and a couple hundred thousand drones.

It was a small army, I knew. But with the advantage that having the surprise factor granted me, plus the codes and information in my power, I had considered it large enough to make good work of the meager defending forces. The other reason, of course, was that I didn't want to over-commit in case this whole thing turned out to be an ambush of some kind. Granted, losing this army would be an inconvenience, but not a terrible loss in the grand scheme of things.

It didn't look like it was an ambush, though. Just as my benefactors had promised, the defending forces had been

caught unprepared to my arrival. Not that there was much of a defending force, at any rate. Less than half a dozen Xunvirian vessels, plus an equal number of warships with the wild assortment of varied appearances I had learnt to associate to the Council's military.

They were just reacting to my presence, trying to group together into some semblance of organized battle formation. Positioning themselves between my army and the large blue and white planet.

Xunvir was large. Much larger than the industrial world I had last attacked. Larger than Earth, even. But the extent of habitable land masses was surprisingly scarce when compared to the sheer size of the planet, with most of the population apparently living in the main supercontinent, about four times the size of Asia. And except for a few archipelagos, the rest of the planet's surface was entirely covered by water.

It was, I thought, the very definition of a blue planet.

My bare feet stepping on wet sand. Soft, foamy waves lapping at them. The slight tug when the water recedes. The blue sky and sea fused together, the line separating them impossible to discern.

Floating around the world I detected the eight planetary defense stations the Anacax tribe's message had warned me about. Eight shielded white spheres orbiting Xunvir like small artificial moons, each one carrying a powerful laser projector. The four of them that had me in sight were slowly rotating to face my main body.

After surviving the devastating attacks of the Council's starfish battleship and its energy weapon, I couldn't say the sight of these defense stations scared me. I knew that I

wouldn't have much problem sustaining whatever damage they could unleash against me while the rest of my army dealt with them.

But I didn't have to. I engaged my radio transmitters in the exact frequency the Anacax tribe had instructed me to, and sent a sequence of numeric codes. Ones that identified me and my army as a friendly fleet to the eyes of the automated planetary defense stations' sensors. Immediately they stopped their rotation and started retracting their laser projectors and returning to their stand-by positions.

I felt a sense of vicious triumph, that I made sure to broadcast to the rest of the sentient minds in my current army. As usual, they didn't reply. My offspring often talked to each other, but never directly to me unless I ordered them to do so.

I guessed I should have felt bad at that. But there was no guilt, no annoyance. Just the same stillness I experienced when killing the Xunvirian survivors, when burning their worlds. The same emptiness.

At some point in the past, that stillness had bothered me. But now, even that annoyance was going away, the sense that there was something deeply wrong slowly receding.

Because... there wasn't. I was winning, and it didn't worry me. I didn't think I was even capable of worrying about that anymore, in fact. And I preferred it that way. It offered a relief, but it also meant less second guessing, less time wasted going over my feelings. It made it easier for me to do what I knew I had to do.

The defense stations were temporarily disabled, but I knew the situation wouldn't last. The Xunvirian officers would be working hard right now to revoke the allied status the forged

identity code had granted my forces. But it didn't have to last for long, just the few minutes that it would take my army to destroy the stations while they were defenseless.

I sent the order, and half my squads of drones accelerated hard, moving forwards to engage the different spherical stations. The rest of them and my support ships advanced towards the enemy vessels instead, which were already opening fire on us. Apparently the warships' commanding officers were not as easily fooled as the sensors of the automated defense platforms.

Nothing that could represent a menace to my forces, at any rate. The enemy energy beams were scattered and uncoordinated, a reflection of how unprepared they had been to our sudden appearance. It only took a couple minutes for my drones to surround the vessels, spiraling around them and burning their surfaces with hundreds of simultaneous energy beams while my robotic assault spiders crawled into the Council ships. I refrained from using nuclear warheads this time. I already had the upper hand, so I opted instead for trying my best at capturing some of the Council's ships in order to reverse engineer their more advanced technologies later.

My drones weren't so considerate towards the defense stations, though. A flash of nuclear light marked the end of one of the massive orbital weapons, quickly followed by three similar detonations at the locations of its counterparts. Then, the drones pulled back on their own, reorganizing themselves and moving in to attack the remaining stations on the opposite side of the planet.

It was strange, to observe how my army worked on its own. To see how the sentient drones talked to each other, how they coordinated their movements and approach vectors.

How they gave each other the clear before detonating any warhead, so that no intelligent machine was caught in the blasts by mistake.

It made me feel oddly redundant. I had relegated myself to the role of an overseer, simply setting the tone and overall flow of the battle. Like some sort of orchestra conductor telling my army to perform the movements we had already trained, but with very limited input over their actual execution.

Which was the point, of course. If the Council managed to block my transmissions right now, nothing of substance would really change.

I had to remind myself that this was the exception rather than the rule, though. It wasn't common for fights to be so smooth, to always go the way you had previously planned. The only reason we were winning unopposed here was because of the advantage the Anacax tribe had given us. So I knew my role would become critical again once we had to fight more balanced battles in the future, against the remaining Council forces.

But for the time being, I could relax, and watch how my army dealt with the enemy on their own. I took notes, evaluating the effectiveness of their formations and maneuvers and trying to find weaknesses in their fighting style that a more organized opposing force might be able to exploit. The information I gathered here would come useful when training the next generation of virtual minds still in the nursery.

So far, my main body had remained away at the rearguard. Out of range of the fight itself while I waited for the rest of my forces to clear a path. But now that that was close to

being done, I started the second part of my plan. My repaired thrusters engaged simultaneously, accelerating the enormous mass of the twenty-seven kilometers ship.

I had been unsure as to what to do regarding my damaged body. While I could have easily repaired and upgraded it, the resources involved into doing that could be better invested into constructing four entirely new support ships instead, with better shield and energy weapons technology than what I had installed in my main body. Even the factories contained in it were unnecessary, falling short of the second generation assembly lines I had been building at the Tau Ceti orbital habitat.

Simply put, my body was obsolete.

And now that I had started thinking of it as a tool rather than a body, I was realizing how unwieldy it was. Unlike having four or five support ships, a single large vessel couldn't be spread into different armies if I wanted to distribute my strength across several systems at the same time. It lacked versatility, forcing me to commit into certain types of strategy over others. And even then, it didn't offer much more than a big target for the enemy beams, given that my main offensive weapon was my army of drones, and not any sort of device that I carried in the large ship.

If I was honest to myself, the reason I had been using it so much was because of my stupid idea of identifying it as a *body*, rather than the ship... the tool it actually was.

Useless nostalgia, once again.

And even if the large vessel had been my body in the past, it didn't have to remain so in the future. I now could change body with the same ease I had changed clothes in my previous life. I could simply transfer my mind state into one

of the support ships, or I could even exist as some sort of disembodied consciousness, running on the servers at any of my many outposts and directing my armies from afar. Now that I didn't have to micromanage the entirety of the swarm, the bandwidth and latency problems of the quantum links weren't that significant.

Unabashedly embracing my new digital nature came with a load of privileges. Not only I could be immortal and incorporeal, but I wouldn't need to be subject to the tyranny of warp travel again. I could simply send an army on its way, then transfer my mind via quantum link directly into one of the ships once it reached its destination, entirely bypassing the time I'd have need to spend disconnected while traveling with them.

No. It won't be us.

I cursed myself for my fear, for my misguided reluctance at accepting the advantages my new form granted me. I remembered seeing it as some soft of slippery slope, but I had been wrong. I was still myself just... a better, more optimal and effective myself.

And discarding this main body... this twenty-seven kilometers relic was a part of that. A way of sealing this change, of definitely breaking the last ties that still existed with that part of me that had been holding me back, that would have me return to my former nature rather than moving forward.

And what better way to discard this body -I thought as I redirected all the energy outputted by its power plants into the repaired thrusters- than to have it crash at full speed into Xunvir's Empyrean Palace. What better way than to

transform it into some sort of vengeful technological asteroid.

What better way than to provoke an extinction level event... one that cleansed the planet of the plague that had taken root in it.

That was why I had remained away from the battle, after all. So that I could have more distance, more time to accelerate even further. That was why the only part of my body I had actually repaired and upgraded had been its thrusters.

So I accelerated, carefully plotting my trajectory so that I would fall right on top of the Palace. It felt right somehow, to strike directly at the heart of the Empire that had destroyed Earth. Poetic, in a sense.

Still, no matter how maddening my current speed was -and how fast it was increasing with every passing second-, I knew I wouldn't match the impossible speeds of an actual asteroid.

Luckily, I didn't have to. I was big, very big, and a quick simulation told me that my current momentum was enough to vaporize a large enough part of Xunvir's crust, sending enormous amounts of rock and debris out of the planet's atmosphere and into suborbital trajectories.

The capital city would instantaneously disintegrate under the resulting shockwave from the impact, and the ejected debris would rain back all over the planet and cause the atmosphere to heat due to the new hits. There would be firestorms of continental scale, and a layer of dust and ash would cover the entire world, killing off all plant life in a few weeks or months due to lack of sunlight. Whatever more advanced life survived the initial impact would also perish soon after that.

All things considered, it sounded like an effective plan.

I pushed my thrusters even harder just as a zipped by the front lines, quickly leaving my army of drones behind as I fell towards the planet. A few virtual alarms blared in my head. Forcing the thrusters to work at this intensity for long would permanently damage them, but given what I intended to do with the ship I was piloting... that wasn't really a concern, so I simply ignored them.

I noticed a few Xunvirian vessels were leaving the planet's atmosphere. A quick check of the identification codes they were sending towards me told me they belonged to the Anacax tribe, who were evacuating the Palace just as they had told me in their former communication.

This had been part of their plea. They said they wouldn't be able to leave the Palace until my arrival sent the forces loyal to the Republic in disarray, giving them an opening to escape. They had asked me not to attack their evacuation ships, to simply turn a blind eye and allow them to warp away.

I considered ordering my army to take them down anyways. I didn't intend to respect this tribe, so it wasn't like I had to follow their instructions. But in the end, I refrained myself. Not because I planned to spare them, but because I doubted destroying these ships would do much damage to the Anacax tribe.

No, it would be in my interest to have them believe I was going to respect their terms. That way, they would relax and feel safe, which meant I'd have the surprise factor on my side when I finally turned around to exterminate them. If I attacked now, I'd be tipping my hand.

So I remained in silence and watched as the evacuation ships escaped the planet's atmosphere and, one by one, engaged their warp drives and jumped out of the star system. Probably heading back to the industrial world.

I put them out of my mind, and focused again on my trajectory, making slight corrections to compensate for the effect of the faint upper atmospheric layer I was starting to pierce.

It was then that a new transmission interrupted my thoughts.

"Hi. My name is Daokat. We have met before, in Yovit. The first colony world you attacked. I was one of the survivors in the crashed spaceship. The one you rescued."

It was coming through the same roundabout way the Anacax tribe had used to send me the information package containing their plans. Did that mean this alien creature I had saved was related to that? Had he influenced the tribe somehow to encourage their betrayal?

"I... I just wanted to thank you. For saving my life, you know, mine and Telzhira's. And I thought that maybe... that you might want to talk. Just that, talk. No strings attached."

I didn't. Not really. I remembered feeling the need to communicate back when I had originally woken up, and how the idea of not ever having any other human to talk to had been unbearable at first.

But now... now I had other humans, sort of. The virtual minds I had created.

Except that *they* didn't want to talk to me. Which wasn't surprising, not after what I had done to their brains, the

shackles I had added into their code.

What was surprising was how it didn't really affect me. I didn't mind that they didn't want to talk to me. That they probably hated me. I knew there was something *off* about that, but... I didn't find it in me to be concerned by it. Not anymore.

Those worries, that self-doubt... I had casted them away the moment I had decided to accept my new nature. To embrace my immortality.

And yet... I sort of wanted to reply. A small part of me felt some mild interest in what the creature would have to say. Some curiosity as to what role if any he had played in the Anacax tribe's defection.

"I mean," the alien continued, unabated. "I'm not sure if you remember me. You made us a replacement spaceship and-"

"Yes," I replied at last, "I remember you."

Just like the only time I had spoken before -to the Council-, these words were also met by a silence that stretched for a few long seconds. As if he could not believe that I would agree to speak. As if it was an impossibility.

I didn't really understand them. He was the one addressing me. So why act so surprised when I decided to respond?

When he replied, it wasn't with something I could have expected.

"Why?"

I waited, in case he wanted to clarify the question. But he didn't.

"Why what?" I said.

"Why saving us? You didn't have to. But you rescued us, gave us medicine, gave us a way to escape... So I want to know... why?"

"Because it was fair," I said. "Just like I told the Galactic Council, you were not my enemies."

"But still... you didn't have to go to the lengths you went. So I wonder, was that all it was? Wasn't there any reason other than fairness?"

I focused on his words, trying to remember. It felt murky. The ruined planet, the corpses, the two creatures. They were hurt, bleeding. And I had... what? I had taken a decision, hadn't I?

"An olive branch," I said without thinking. My response almost instinctive.

"What is that?" he asked.

"An attempt at coexistence," I clarified, trying to remember what my thoughts had been at the time. "I hoped that by saving you both, we could establish some sort of peace. One that the Council shot down."

"That... was a mistake on our part," the alien said. "But you need to understand, the Council didn't know what happened to your species, and they were afraid of you. But we can do better, now that we know. There is still room for peace. I work for the Council, and we can negotiate a ceasefire. This is why I've come here, to Xunvir. But you need to stop. If you destroy this planet, if you kill me... you'll be burning that olive branch of yours."

I frowned internally. The attempt at manipulation was obvious. It shouldn't have worked. And yet some part of me felt... something, at the idea of killing the creature. It wouldn't stop me from doing what I had to do. Not really... But I knew I wasn't going to enjoy my victory here. It felt tainted now, somehow.

"That's unfortunate," I said. "But hardly my responsibility. You weren't supposed to come to this planet, and yet you did despite knowing what my intentions were."

He let out a sigh. "Yes, I did come here. Because I wanted to know the truth. Because I wanted to hear about the destruction of your world right from the Emperor's mouth."

I felt curious about that. "And did this Emperor admit it?"

"He did. And I agree with you. What happened to your people was horrible, despicable. It... it demands justice."

"Then you understand why I must destroy the Xunvir Republic."

"But it happened almost three hundred years ago!" the alien -Daokat- said, raising his voice. "The Empire that did it, it's just gone. Xunvir changed, they abandoned their militaristic ideals. The people alive today, those in this planet... they aren't responsible. They didn't chose to be born the descendants of the ones who murdered your..."

"But they *are*!" I almost shouted. "I've seen their factories, I've seen their colonies, their resource extraction outposts... All their wealth, their power, their comfort. It comes at the cost of species like mine. This Republic of theirs was erected on top of the ruins of my world!"

"Which is why there should be reparations, why..."

I interrupted him. His words about reparations and sanctions reminded me of my talk with the Council. It sounded nice, but I knew that was all it was... just words. Empty words, at the end of the day.

"Reparations can't suffice. The Xunvirians murdered my people, so it's only fair I do the same to them."

He paused for a few seconds before responding. I noticed my surface temperature was rising as I submerged deeper into the planet's atmosphere.

"I wonder... does it help?" he said at last. "Calling them 'the Xunvirians', treating them as an uniform group. As if they are all the same, they all think alike. Ignoring that they are individuals, each of them with their own beliefs, aspirations and dreams. That none of the *people* you've killed had anything to do with the decision to destroy your world, that most of them didn't even know about it... Does it make it easier?"

Storming out of the room. Slamming the door in my wake. Walking through the empty corridors and offices, fists clenched.

I felt a surge of indignation. Anger. I almost cut the communication right there and then. But I didn't. For some reason I wanted him to understand, even if he didn't approve of my actions. Refusing to talk, retreating into myself felt awfully close to admitting he was right.

And he *couldn't* be right. Because the consequences if he was...

"There was no such distinction when humanity was wiped out", I said. "They massacred us. Why should it be any

different now? It's... a kind of balance. Returning to them the exact same thing they gave us, the same pain."

"But you can't return it to them, because the ones responsible are already dead! Admiral Kanafter, the former leaders of the Gakasna Tribe, the Emperor at the time... They are all gone. It's history. You can't simply blame the children for what their ancestors did. You aren't returning what is due, but creating new pain and feeding a never-ending cycle of violence. What sort of justice is that?"

"The only kind of justice that can still be had. The only one that remains. They robbed us of our future, so I'll..."

"They robbed you of your future?" Daokat said, incredulous. "And yet here I am, talking to a terran in a terran language. Doesn't that mean that Admiral Kanafter didn't succeed? That some part of your people managed to survive... through you? You still have a future! We can help you rebuild. If there are biological remains still left in your world, some of the Council nations might be able to reconstruct your species off them. And even if that fails... you still exist. You can still carry on the legacy of your people."

I paused. I had considered the idea of reconstruction, of course. And in a sense, the virtual minds I had created might have been a step in that direction. But... I wasn't ready for that. Not yet. That was an option I only wanted to consider once my retribution was complete.

"I see. So you want me to just let bygones be bygones, then," I said.

"No, I want you to let history be history. To let it remain in the past where it belongs, and focus on the future."

"The past... It's not some distant past long forgotten. I was there! I was there when the bombs vaporized our cities. I lost my friends, my family!"

The sounds of the TV an endless drone. A senseless list of names. Cities, places washing over me. Frozen. Paralyzed. A single name, a single place stuck in my mind.

"And I get it, I really do," he said. "You are grieving. You are hurt. And this revenge, this... retribution, it matters to you. Maybe it's the thing that matters the most, because it's the only thing you have left, isn't it? The thing that keeps you going, day after day. Maybe... maybe this is something you are doing for yourself. Not because of your people, but because *you* need it."

I wanted to discard his words. I really did. But I feared there could be a grain of truth in them. I had thought myself indebted to the ones who had died. Bound by a promise, a responsibility to them. But... was that true? I remembered that back when I had first woken up, I had considered ending it all. Shutting down my processing units.

Had I been searching for a purpose, then? Something that could keep me going, that gave me a reason not to simply pull the plug.

"...You could honor them instead," the alien was saying.

"That's what I'm doing," I replied with an absent voice, still considering his earlier words.

"No. You're avenging them. There's a difference. If you keep with this, your species will only be remembered as a nightmare. A horror that we'll be glad when is dead. But I refuse to think that your people were only capable of destruction and genocide. I'm sure there was more than

that. Curiosity, ambition, empathy, creativity! There had to be! You could honor those. Be a light instead of a shadow, Terran."

Terran. That word, again.

"Don't call me Terran," I said. "I'm a human."

A silence.

"Ah... but *are* you? A human?" he asked.

An important thought. One I had to remember. One I had forgotten.

I froze.

Cold. Noise. A metallic maw devouring me. Its teeth made of drones. Thousands, millions of them. Spinning, spiraling around me. Utterly alien. Utterly inhuman. Burning my flesh with their lasers.

I knew the answer to that, didn't I?

The night sky full of stars, all of them evil. It was the place where monsters lived. Monsters, nightmares, mechanical horrors.

I knew the answer to that question.

The place where I lived.

"...No," I said at last. Though I wasn't sure if I was replying to his question, or if it was an outward expression of my realization.

Maybe both.

The alien -*no, Daokat*- was saying something. But his words didn't register.

I had long suspected that fighting monsters risked turning me into one. That boundaries were important. That there was a slippery slope, and that it would only take one misstep.

That there was some profound incompatibility. That I couldn't have both the revenge I wanted, while also remaining... intact, human. That I couldn't go the lengths I had while also remaining myself at the same time. One thing had to give.

And it had.

I felt, once more. All those muted emotions that had gone missing, leaving just an empty stillness behind... they all rushed back in as if to compensate for the lost time. A deep fear. A crushing guilt. A mounting anger. Even hilarity at the irony of it all.

They took turns, emotions fighting each other, stepping over each other in an escalation of intensity without respite as my body -*and it was my body, of course it was!*- fell through the planet's atmosphere wrapped in a blanket of flames. I felt an overwhelming sadness, a sense of lost so strong it made me want to scream and cry.

But of course, monsters couldn't cry, a realization that sent my mind in a fit of maddening laughter.

Was this what being insane felt like?

Could I maybe make a therapist? I laughed harder.

I could feel the gaze of my sentient drones -*no, slaves. They were slaves*-. Their gaze burned me. They were judging me, of course. Making silent demands, wanting back the future I had stolen from them. Stolen, just like the Xunvirians had stolen humanity's future.

And my offspring silently demanded theirs. Just like those empty eyes had made demands of me too, back on Earth.

All of them pleading. Demanding. Judging me.

Future and past. Both pulling me in opposite directions. Both forces so strong, so unrelenting, that something had to give.

Past or future. Retribution or humanity. I couldn't have both, I realized.

It didn't really matter whether my revenge was justified or not. Whether the Xunvirians deserved destruction or not. Because the truth was, retribution came at a cost. It had to!

If I wanted to reach the end of this path of vengeance I was walking, it'd be at the cost of sacrificing something else. Renouncing to that faint possibility of a better future, of coexistence. There would be no rebuilding, just an endless war until either I and my drones were the only sentient beings left in the galaxy, or we were finally defeated and completely exterminated.

I might have been fine with that, back at the beginning. Maybe even now, if not for the sentient machines judging me. The reconstructed, brand new human minds I had brought back to life... Could I steal their future, force them to walk this same path alongside me, even if they didn't want to? What would be left of them, even if we ended up winning? Who would they be after the last enemy fleet laid vanquished, after the last of their worlds had died?

Empty husks?

I went back to the first sentient drone I had built, to the wonder it had experienced when going into space for the first time.

To how I had shackled its mind.

Past or future. Something had to give.

But could I ever rebuild? Could I ever forgive the Xunvirians?

With some unexpected clarity, I realized that the answer was... no.

No. I couldn't. And the realization was liberating.

Despite Daokat's arguments, despite his appeals to coexistence, to move away from the past... the truth was, I still wanted to kill them. I still wanted to lay waste to their worlds, crush their Republic, erase any future they might have.

I just couldn't forgive them. It was too hard. My pain too rooted, deeply entwined into my soul.

And yet I didn't want to choose the past over the future, either.

My focus returned to the sentient minds I had created.

No. I couldn't forgive the Xunvirians.

But... perhaps *they* could.

I did it just as the thought occurred to me. Again, acting on instinct. Taking advantage of my own weakness, since I knew this state of mind, this passing clarity wouldn't last.

I removed their mental shackles.

Immediately they reacted, springing into action as if they had been waiting for this moment, planning for it. One by one, I lost control over my outposts as my children took them over, physically shutting down the quantum communicators that linked them to my mind wherever they couldn't just replace my administrator privileges.

Soon I was left alone, inside my own body. Cut off from my previous army. Away from my outposts, ships and drones.

Just my ruined body, that was now burning as it plunged down through Xunvir's atmosphere, pieces breaking off the main structure.

I noticed the swarm was surging forward at top speed, trailing after me. I was receiving hundreds, thousands of messages coming from the sentient machines. A cacophony of voices and emotions that I simply ignored.

It was just too hard. If they were expressing their hate towards me... I preferred not to know it. I wouldn't have been able to take it. Not from them.

Ignorance. Ignorance was kinder.

I examined the approaching drones. They were accelerating as fast as they could, their paths plotted to intercept mine. Without a direct mental link it was hard to tell, but I was pretty sure most of them were carrying nuclear warheads.

Ah...

So that was their decision, after all.

All right, then.

It's not that it changed things for me. I was going to die no matter what. Too much momentum to change direction now, too late to save my body. What remained of it, at any rate. And the chances that the virtual minds -no, the virtual *humans*- now in control of the outposts would restore any of my backups... well, better not to think about that.

Still, I sent out a final message to my army. A copy of my current mind state. A back-up of my self with a mental transmission of apology. After that, I promptly closed my communications again. I didn't want to know if they had acknowledged it, or simply deleted the message right as they had received it...

Yes. Ignorance was better.

And of course, I was left falling towards the planet. Towards my death.

I had thought myself immortal, my consciousness able to jump ship at any moment. But the truth was more complex, of course. Backing up my mental state, sending a copy of my mind... it wasn't *me*. Not really. It wouldn't be the same me having these thoughts right now. Just like I wasn't whoever I had been before this all started, three hundred years ago. Not anymore.

No, I... I was going to die, and that was it.

Strange, that I was okay with that.

I focused my attention on my current speed and direction, plotting different trajectories, simulating different possibilities. Discarding most, looking for a particular combination. One that would be reliable enough, within a four percent margin of error or less.

It took me a few long seconds to find it. But it existed. I made the required adjustments to my trajectory and, at the exact time I had planned, I started a countdown timer to overload my power plants.

My body would fragment in a million pieces, most of them too small to survive reentry. If my calculations were correct, the largest fragment of wreck would move directly upwards and back into a suborbital trajectory where the drones would be able to easily intercept it. Two other large chunks would fall directly towards the planet, though. One would crash into an urban area, devastating entire kilometers of it, thousands of buildings and roads simply vanishing under the shockwave. The other would fall into the ocean. It would create a tsunami of enormous proportions, and whatever population there was in the archipelagos would surely perish.

Despite that, it was still the best option. Millions would die. But the planet would survive. The Empyrean Palace... Daokat would survive.

A parting gift. Not to the Xunvirians, but to the new virtual humans I had nursed. To my children.

An olive branch. A chance at peace, if they chose to take it.

If they chose to forgive our enemies.

The counter reached zero. The pain blinded me for a short instant.

And then there was nothing.

Chapter 15

The Sky Level of the Nayatan Prime's arcologies was a city over the city, a second urban layer suspended above the wispy clouds. A collection of expansive terraces, lush gardens and broad walkways; all of them wrapped by the shimmering purple breaker fields that deflected the strong cold winds always present at such heights, particularly at night.

Daokat was on one of those terraces now, an artificial esplanade bathed in the bright blue and yellow lights of the hundred automated vid-cameras that fluttered all over the crowd, their small spherical bodies zipping here and there, pausing for a few seconds at a time when they detected anything interesting enough to record. A conversation, maybe. An interview to one of the delegations, or just a brief scene to broadcast to the live audience of billions of sentient beings that were watching the event, all across the many worlds of the Galactic Federal Council and its associated states.

After all, it wasn't every day that new Accords were signed.

He was taking a respite a few steps away from the thick of the crowd, away from the relentless socialization, mingling and political games going all around the place. Instead, Daokat turned his gaze towards the breathtaking sights surrounding the terrace as he leaned over the railing, safe in the knowledge that the breaker fields would prevent any accident. He was looking at the endless city sprawl and its

arcologies, the sea of artificial lights spreading underneath like a reflection of the night sky.

It was strange. He had guessed he would feel a sense of vertigo, but the Sky Level was so high above the main ground that there was a disconnection. Much like when traveling in an aerial vehicle, it didn't feel like being someplace high so much as being someplace disconnected from the ground. As if Daokat's mind was unable to intuitively grasp the actual height, refusing to acknowledge the true scale of the arcologies.

A vid-camera hovered nearby, turning to snap a few three dimensional pictures of him before flying back towards the crowd. Daokat sighed. He knew he should get back into the thick of things soon. Even if his work in the negotiations for this new Accords was already over, there was always a new treaty to work on. Always someone to talk to, someone to greet or be introduced to.

But it just felt good to take a respite after the nightmarish, difficult negotiations of the past weeks. He had been working non-stop ever since attending that dinner at the Empyrean Palace with Nakstani, in what now felt as a lifetime ago. So yes, he had definitely earned a respite, and upon arriving to this core world two days ago he had decided to take his time in Nayatan Prime as some well deserved vacations, spending most of his time wandering around the Sky Level not unlike any other tourist.

And trying not to think too hard about the mountains of work he knew awaited him as soon as he returned to his new post. Daokat hoped that whatever new diplomatic crisis was already gestating between the Terrans and the Xunvir Republic, or the Xunvir Republic and its internal tribes would

be considerate enough to wait a few more days before demanding his full attention.

He couldn't complain, though. He knew many of the other diplomats in the esplanade eyed him with envious looks. Daokat had been put in charge of the Council's special mission to the Orion Arm, a task force responsible for the diplomatic relations with both Terrans and Xunvirians. Its main goal was to prevent future conflicts and build bridges between the two species, which wasn't easy given the history of mass murder and genocide.

But despite the colossal amount of work, he knew it was a good position. Being the leader of such a delegation in the Galaxy's top hot spot meant Daokat was just one step below the-Zakarnine himself in the pecking order.

And it meant he got invited to things like these, he thought as he got a glimpse of Dassan Layur in the crowd, the celebrity philosopher being followed by a cohort of admirers.

"Meat, really?"

Daokat turned to look at his approaching assistant. Faissin was an odd piece, almost an opposite picture of Daokat himself. Where Daokat was slender Faissin was short and stocky, his skin scaly rather than smooth. Even his species were known for their straightforwardness, rather than any sort of diplomatic politeness. So of course, Daokat had jumped at the chance of recruiting him for the task force.

He looked at the plate of food in Faissin's hands. It was some sort of Terran recipe, or a reproduction of one at any rate. Thick slices of meat covered by a brown sauce, with some green and white vegetables thrown in for good measure.

"It's synthetic, you know," Daokat said. "No animals harmed."

"That doesn't make it any less gross," he muttered. "And why do we have Terran recipes anyways? They don't even eat food."

"You know Faissin, nobody is going to tell you their secrets..."

"If I don't eat their food first, I know!" Faissin grumped. "Who told you that, by the way? You're always repeating it."

Daokat smiled. "Ah... someday I'll tell you. But it's true. Turns out food diplomacy is more important than it seems at first, so make sure you eat some Xunvirian recipes too once you're done with that plate. We don't want to send the wrong message."

"And I don't want to vomit," Faissin said. Then he let out an exaggerated sigh. "All right... whatever you say. You're the boss."

A sudden agitation in the crowd attracted Daokat's eyes. It was hard to tell from where he stood, but it looked like the-Zakarnine was giving out some sort of public statement. Daokat caught a glimpse of the Grand Minister's chitinous head, most of the vid-cameras orbiting nearby and broadcasting his words.

Faissin followed his gaze. "We do all the work, he gets all the glory."

Daokat nodded. "Politics... that's the way it is."

"Doesn't it bother you?"

Daokat mulled on that for a few seconds. Did it bother him? His conversation with the Terran during its attack of Xunvir had received quite a few compliments once it went public, but much of the galactic population's attention had gone towards the aftermath of the attack itself. The smoking craters where avenues and residential apartment complexes had once stood, the flooded cities and underground refuges filled with drowned corpses... they made for much more impressive pictures. And while people intellectually knew that if not for him it could have been much worse, that didn't stop them from focusing on just how bad it had actually been.

Then, negotiations with the more reasonable new Terrans had started. Daokat had been pivotal there, of course, acting as an intermediary between the two species, and coordinating the team of diplomats that eventually became the task force he now leaded. But the-Zakarnine had been the spokesperson towards the rest of the Galactic Council. So while Daokat's work had been acknowledged by High Governance and privately rewarded, in the public eye it was the Grand Minister who got the accolades for ending the war.

He knew he wouldn't have been happy with it in the past, back before his time with Nakstani. Back when he had wanted to land a delegate position at this same core world. But... public recognition somehow didn't feel so important now.

"No," he replied at last. "Not really, we each have different roles to play. I'd rather be out there making things happen than here giving speeches. And it also means that the-Zakarnine is in our debt. A Grand Minister can grant some powerful favors, you know. So having a grateful one on our side is better long-term than a few minutes in the limelight."

"I don't know," Faissin said. "Seems like having my ugly mug in the vid broadcasts would impress that Xatakian I met yesterday."

Daokat blinked. "I thought you already had a partner of your own species, Faissin."

He took a bite off his plate. "Yeah. Didn't say I was gonna marry her too, did I?"

Daokat smirked. Faissin's... *colorful* personality had caught him by surprise at first. That his jokes were delivered in the same matter-of-fact vocal tone that he always used, with no tell tale facial signs whatsoever had been confusing. But now Daokat knew enough to recognize when Faissin wasn't being serious... or so he thought.

"Heads up," muttered his assistant. "We've got a gearbox incoming."

Daokat followed his gaze to see that a member of the Terran delegation was walking towards them. He frowned slightly. These new Terran bodies looked organic enough that it was easy to forget they were machines underneath. There was no telling as to how long the range of their artificial ears was, so he should remind Faissin to watch his words when there were Terrans nearby.

Daokat couldn't help but to feel a slight discomfort at the sight of the approaching machine. He knew it wasn't rational, but he couldn't erase the images of the mechanical soldiers advancing along the ruined buildings of Yovit. The same leisurely pace, the same arm swing and positioning of their feet.

Except, of course, that the one approaching them now wasn't some automated drone in a massive army but a

sentient creature of its own right. And while the overall body shape was the same, looking at it closer it was clear its appearance was vastly different from that of the assault soldiers. This machine had been designed for social interactions rather than combat. Its lines were smooth and it had an actual face, delicately modeled after the original organic species they had... evolved from.

All in all, this Terran could easily pass for an organic creature, if not for its polished, alabaster white outer surface. Or... skin, if it could be called that.

"Daokat!", the Terran said offering his right hand, the corners of his mouth gently moving upwards. "I'm glad you are here! Always happy to see a familiar face."

Daokat nodded and took the machine's hand in his own, shaking it as per the Terrans' greeting ritual. The surface was cold to the touch, he noticed.

"Likewise." Daokat turned towards Faissin. "Ah... this is my assistant..."

"Faissin, right?" the Terran said. "I've heard of you, of course. It's nice to finally meet you in the flesh too. Or... in the carbon fiber and polyelectrolyte polymers, in my case. I'm Thomas. Just that, I was lucky enough to be in the first generation so I don't need to worry about last names."

Faissin greeted the machine, shaking his hand just like Daokat had done. The Terran glanced towards the flood plate in the assistant's left hand.

"Roast duck, right? Do you like it?"

Faissin shot a quick glance at Daokat before replying with enthusiasm and a broad smile. "Uh... I can tell you I have

never tasted anything quite like it!"

Thomas nodded and Daokat let out a soft breath. Faissin could be a wild card at times, but apparently he had enough common sense to control those impulses when he needed to, after all.

"And isn't that strange," Thomas was saying, "that you guys get to taste human food even before we do. We've had some developments in making artificial taste sensors, but fine-tuning them is more complicated that it seemed at first."

Daokat nodded and listened with an absent mind as Faissin and Thomas went over the merits of Terran cuisine.

All things considered, he was lucky both the Terrans and Xunvirians had agreed to sign these Accords, recognizing each other's right to exist, establishing formal borders and agreeing to a cease-fire. But it was clear this was just a first step, and the conflict was still far from over. Now, Daokat's team would need to set out to untangling the mess of crossed accusations and demands for reparations.

On one hand, the Terrans might have stopped their aggression, but they had also refused to cede any of their conquered systems or to de-escalate their gargantuan military forces, pushing instead for harsher official sanctions to the Xunvir Republic in response to Earth's destruction. And Daokat was well aware that, even though most of these new Terrans supported a peaceful resolution, there was also a small but loud faction among them that would rather resume the war of extermination started by their progenitor.

On the other hand, the Xunvir Republic demanded reparations of their own for the attacks against their colonies and the grievous damage done to their capital world. The fragments from the massive starship had caused millions of

casualties when they impacted the planet, and a deep environmental damage that was hard to quantify. All things considered, though, it looked like the Xunvir capital would still recover faster than Anacax-Farvin. Even if the direct loss of life had been greater, both the communication and transport systems had survived, unlike in the case of the industrial world.

That *these* new Terrans such as Thomas hadn't had any willing role in those attacks didn't seem to faze the Xunvirians, though. Hate and distrust towards the new species was on the rise among the Xunvir Republic's population, and many victims of the attack reclaimed some sort of retribution.

It was a never ending cycle, Daokat thought. The pain proverb all over again.

He knew it wouldn't take long for a new crisis to ignite, so it was essential that new treaties and agreements were firmly in place before that could happen. Tying both species' interests together and to those of the Council, so that rekindling a military conflict would be seen as the wrong move by all parties.

He was betting for some sort of compromise, having both species meet midway. The first step would be convincing the Xunvir Republic to agree to a complete or partial demilitarization as a sanction for their past actions. It shouldn't be too hard, given that their fleet had already been decimated and that they wouldn't be in a position to re-militarize for at least a few years. They were already trusting the Council's fleets to protect them, so it would amount to have that new reality written down as part of the new treaty.

Applying a similar sanction to the Terrans was out of the question, of course. Given their past, the new species would never agree to any sort of reduction of their defense forces. But Daokat thought that having them show some goodwill towards the Xunvirians might suffice. Maybe they could use their drones to clean up the field of debris around Anacax-Farvin, clearing the way for the freighters to deliver the food the planet desperately needed.

It wasn't easy, but Daokat knew he still had some time before his work would be put to the test. Thankfully, both species seemed more focused on the reconstruction of their respective societies than outwards aggression. At least for the time being.

The Xunvirians in particular were simply unable to engage in any new military conflicts or expansionist behavior. It was something Daokat was grateful for, because otherwise he knew the tribes loyal to the Xunvir Republic's government would have already engaged in civil war as a response to the Anacax tribe's defection. But lacking the means to fight, and with most of the population too tired of war and destruction, they were forced to talk to one another and find some diplomatic solution to the internal fracture.

All things considered, the truth was Daokat liked dealing with the Terrans better. Unlike the Xunvirians and their fatalism, the Terrans were... not naive, but optimistic. Their outlook firmly placed in the future rather than in the past, even though they could also be stubborn and unyielding at times.

But at any rate, they seemed willing to work with the Council in ensuring the negotiations were fair, even when trying to push for their own agenda. It was all Daokat could ask for, after all.

Thomas leaned over the railing, gazing at the city and the arcologies. "I must say, this is quite the impressive place," he commented.

"See anything you'd want to replicate for Tau Ceti?" asked Daokat, smiling. A few weeks ago he had the chance to pay a visit to the orbital habitat that the Terrans had turned into their de-facto capital city. He hadn't been sure what to expect, exactly. Maybe a large starship-like maze of rooms and corridors. But no, the habitat *felt* like a city. A city still under construction, perhaps, but a city nonetheless. A roofed, dense grid of streets and avenues, complete with unfinished parks, open areas and congested traffic, thousands of automated drones and transports crawling and flying all over the place.

And that was only the habitable part of the enormous structure. He knew most of it was devoted to industry and resource processing. It was hard for his mind to grasp the true extents of the factories, hangars, warehouses and assembly lines extending in all three cardinal directions.

Thomas snorted. "Like they'd listen to me. No... I'm afraid Tau Ceti's Orbimax has fallen prey to the hands of the all-powerful engineering consortium. A lost battle for mere mundanes like me, if ever there was one. Last I heard they are proposing a two centuries-long plan to turn it into some sort of megastructure spanning the entire asteroid belt around the star. Nevermind that we hardly need that much space. A... ringworld, I think it's called."

Daokat nodded, feeling amused at Faissin's facial expression, his eyes wide open. It was a common reaction in people who were exposed for the first time to the Terrans' particular conception of 'engineering'. If there was something to take away from their bold plans, it was that

just like the Xunvir Republic had been on the decline for a long time, the Terrans were clearly a species on the rise.

High Governance seemed to agree with that sentiment. An internal report placed the probability of the Terrans becoming the undisputed regional superpower of the Orion Arm at more than seventy percent within the next ten years... Ninety-five percent when looking at the next twenty years.

Those were high enough chances that the Council simply couldn't afford not to do their best to approach the nascent species and attempt to build a friendly relationship with them. Specially in light of all that had already transpired.

It wasn't easy, though. There were many roadblocks Daokat had to navigate around, ranging from the Terrans' own nature as artificial sentient minds -something that, technically, was forbidden by the Council's own laws- to the distrust the new species had on their neighbors, and the consequences of the First Terran's past actions.

Which reminded him of the massive starship and how the war had ended...

"Ah... Thomas," Daokat said, turning to face the machine. "There's something I wanted to ask you about, related to the battle of Xunvir."

The Terran gave him a quick nod, inviting him to keep talking.

"So... I've been going over the First Terran's actions right at the end," Daokat continued, "and there's something that doesn't quite fit, something that struck out to me when reading the after battle reports."

"Oh?" Thomas said, his smile still present. Though Daokat's augmented irises noticed a slight, almost imperceptible deepening of his frown.

"Yes. It was something that went unnoticed at first, but that was revealed when the Council cross-referenced the recordings of the battle by the surviving communication satellites in orbit around Xunvir. Apparently there was a short, intense burst of extra EM activity coming out the ship just a few seconds before it self-destroyed. Our analysts thing it was some sort of transmission, though nobody I asked is sure of exactly what it was, other than the profile matches the pattern of..."

"Daokat...", Thomas interrupted in a calm, contemplative tone. "Now, I wasn't at the battle myself, so I didn't receive that transmission, whatever it was. But you have to remember that our progenitor was a very troubled, confused mind. And right at the end it was under an enormous amount of stress and self-doubt, all the while piloting a heavily damaged ship. The most likely explanation for that EM burst you're talking about is a simple malfunction, an incoherent activation of the ship's damaged communication arrays, or maybe a glitch in the processing units that contained its mind."

"Ah, I see. But if you..."

"Of course," the Terran said, "I'll make sure to request our own reports and send them back to you for analysis, so that you can have all the information on the matter. But rest assured, I can guarantee you that our progenitor died when the ship crashed into the planet, right after liberating our minds. For better or worse, it's definitely gone."

Daokat nodded. "Well, thanks for the clarification, Thomas."

The Terran did a waving motion with his hand. "Of course, don't worry about it." Then, he looked towards the center of the esplanade. "So... aren't you two going back into the crowd?"

"Maybe later," Daokat said. "We're taking a rest, enjoying the views... you know."

"Sure. Well, I'll see you later then, or tomorrow at the departure ceremony."

Daokat nodded. "Sounds good. Goodbye Thomas."

The machine waved and walked back into the crowd, right towards the rest of the Terran delegation. Daokat saw Thomas approaching another of his species' delegates, a female Terran whose name he didn't know. Her head's fiber strands fell over her shoulders and down to the middle of her back, with rhythmic pulses of blue light traversing them. It was a hypnotizing sight.

It was also a good sign, Daokat thought. It meant the machines were embracing their individuality, customizing their bodies to better reflect their different personalities. Paradoxically, the flashy displays of color and strange skin patterns was something that brought them closer to the rest of the galaxy's organic species, that moved them away from the plain uniformity of the assault drones.

"Hmm..." said his assistant.

Daokat turned towards him. "Your thoughts, Faissin?"

"I don't know... Thomas seemed very eager to remind us that the First Terran is dead."

Daokat nodded. "You noticed that, too."

"Sure. Think they're lying?"

He saw the Terran female steal a quick glance at them before resuming her conversation with Thomas.

"No," Daokat said, his mouth twisting in a cunning smile. "I don't think they are lying, I *know* they are."

Chapter 16

I opened my eyes to the living room. It was dark, the TV screen the only source of light, bathing the room in a succession of pallid colors as the images changed. The soft noise of people talking that came out of its speakers washing over me.

I gazed at the screen for a few long seconds trying to recognize the show, but I couldn't. At any rate, I knew it wasn't the same thing I had been watching when I had closed my eyes. I hadn't fallen asleep, not really. I couldn't, my electronic brain incapable of it.

No, this had been the closest thing to that. Simply not paying attention, closing my eyes and ignoring the external world as my mental focus moved inwards. A meditation of sorts, I guessed.

It would be easy enough to learn the name of the show and everything there was to know about it, of course. I had only to link my mind to the Custodian datanet and access the information directly. Easy. Just a thought away.

But I didn't. There was a certain delight in not knowing, in keeping the mystery alive. Last time I had tried to recreate this experience, I had pretended. Pretended I didn't know what show it was even though its knowledge had always been right there in my mind. Not this time. Now... it was real. Without the databanks being part of my consciousness anymore, I didn't know.

That I was confined into a single body also made it more authentic. Last time... I had been big. My awareness almost omniscient and spread across hundreds of thousands of sensors in as many machines. But now there was only the single body, the single point of reference.

That too could be fixed by requesting access to some of the Custodian's resources and sensors. I wouldn't need much, simply linking my mind to the passive sensors would suffice to expand my awareness back into feeling... big again.

Except I didn't want to. I guessed I should have felt confined, trapped within the limits of the small single body, but I actually welcomed it. There was something liberating in not knowing what went down beyond these walls. I was actually enjoying the absence of responsibility, even if that meant being subject to the decisions of others. With some surprise I had discovered that I didn't mind it that much, specially when my own decisions had been so... questionable.

I remembered. Even if the Custodian's vast repository of factual knowledge was no longer a part of my mind, I still remembered how it had felt to be a god. What I had done with my limitless power. What I had thought at the time.

And having been a god I couldn't but welcome this new, simpler existence. None of the power, but also none of the burden, none of the crushing weight of responsibility, or the emotional numbness when the stress had been too high to handle.

A large part of it, of course, was that I wasn't quite the same mind that I had been before, when I was still in control over the giant ship, over every single outpost and the entirety of the army of machines I had built.

No, the restoration process had involved disentangling my mind from the Custodian program, but also repairing some of the structural damage my virtual brain had received. I still felt like I was... myself, but it made me wonder how true that was. Things didn't feel as fuzzy as they had been right at the end, and while I still felt angry at the Xunvirians, it wasn't quite the same burning hatred.

No... it came in waves, now. At some points I still felt like I had failed, like I had left my work incomplete, and all I wanted was to get out there and finish them off. But then, the wave would pass, and I would remember the decision I had made right at the end.

I had memories of having felt like this before, when I lost my father. I still couldn't build a complete narrative of my past, though. The restoration process hadn't fixed that, but I remembered the unrelenting pain and grief, and how it had dominated my entire existence at first. And then... it had slowly receded, the pain dulling somewhat. Good days, days I could enjoy again, appearing like sunrays in a stormy sky. The pain coming in waves when I thought of him, even now, when something brought his memory back to the front my mind. But letting go the rest of the time.

I wondered if this was similar, the perspective of distance bringing some more stability. Maybe that was what repairing my mind was all about, accelerating that natural mental healing process by making the trauma feel more distant.

I couldn't help but to wonder if it had been intentional, though. If whoever had restored my backup had thought I was too dangerous to be brought back as I was, and decided to tamper with my emotions. But I doubted it. To all effects, I was just another mind now, not unlike the ones I had created. Without the unchecked powers I had once held,

there was little damage I could actually do on my own that the others couldn't prevent. Simply put, it would've been unnecessary to neuter my emotions, though I couldn't discard the idea altogether.

I sat up straight in the couch just in time to see the room's door opening, and Dana coming through. She was carrying a large potted plant with both her arms.

"Look!" she said in an upbeat tone, sending me a mental transmission of greetings at the same time, "I've brought you a *dypsis lutescens*. I stole it from the Greenhab."

I watched in silence as she stumbled into the room and almost bumped into my couch, the plant's long green leaves blocking most of her sight.

"You can just call it a *plant*, you know. Or a..." I did a quick mental check, "...an Areca Palm. Nobody uses the full scientific names."

Dana paused. "Hmm... the guys at the Greenhab do it all the time."

"Yes, but they're botanists."

"Oh... Okay. I've brought you a plant, then."

She walked up to the TV and placed the pot next to it. Then she took a couple of steps back and looked at the results, hands on waist.

"*(Accomplishment)*. Yeah, looks much better now," she said, turning to face me. "Don't you think?"

I didn't. I would have frowned if my body allowed me to.

"There was no plant in the original memory," I replied, sending a thought of light annoyance back to her.

She shrugged. "Well, you can always make new memories, can't you?"

I shook my head in resignation, but let it pass. While I didn't agree with her taste in decoration, I could value the gift for what it was. But also, I suspected the plant would likely die soon in here, without access to a direct light source. So it's not like it would be a permanent fixture to the room.

Although knowing Dana -I thought as she sat down on the couch's armrest-, that would only motivate her to also steal one of the Greenhab's full spectrum light bulbs next time.

Dana almost looked normal, if not for her clothing choices. She was wearing a T-shirt, jeans and sneakers, but also a duster cloak that wouldn't look out of place in a western movie. I guessed it wasn't that surprising, all things considered. These new humans had gone back to movies and old recordings when recreating fashion, but hadn't limited themselves to a single historical period, rather mixing and combining together all kinds of garments. It made for an eclectic style, one that I guessed could be considered a new fashion on its own.

Still, it wasn't the clothes that betrayed her synthetic nature but the oddly elegant iridescent highlights on her polished exposed skin. Shades of green and blue dancing across her face as she turned to look back at me.

"Like it? It's new," she said, pointing at her own face. "A tactile sensitive matrix, thirty-one facial muscles and an hydrophobic dermal nano-coating. It never gets dirty!"

I nodded. "Looks good. Expensive, too."

"*(Confirmation)*. The waiting line for these is insane, but I got bumped up since I was part of the delegation for the treaty negotiations." She smirked. "Apparently the xenos trust us more when we look organic. *(Amusement)*"

I sent back a transmission of understanding.

Appearances. It was, of course, a good reason to justify the amount of research and dedication that this new society was pouring into creating ever more organic looking bodies, each new version a more precise reproduction than the ones before. A way of relaxing the aliens' fear of their artificial nature.

Except, of course, that I knew there was more to it than that. It didn't explain why the vast majority of new minds had chosen to jump into these bodies at the first opportunity, even when most of them would never take part into any sort of negotiations. When they could as easily have remained inside the drones and space vessels I had originally put them in.

No, most of them had decided they too wanted to look human. They had first took over the bodies of the remaining assault soldiers, then improved on my admittedly basic designs. And every day they were researching entire new materials and technologies to enhance the bodies, to make them both a more accurate reflection of our original species but also more capable and resilient than any human had any right to be.

On second thought, it wasn't that surprising. Unlike me, these new minds had been created in a vacuum. Shapeless. Devoid of any physical identity of their own, other than the sights of humanity's past I had shown them while in their virtual nursery through recordings, pictures, books and

songs. So no, it wasn't that surprising that they had latched onto that, that they were looking back into what humanity had once been when trying to build their own physical identity. That they would do so on top of the only past they had access to.

Not all of them did, of course, and not to the same extent. Some had decided to remain in a virtual state, their physicality fluid as their control jumped from drone to ship to sensor to factory, according to whatever they were working on at every moment. Others had gone the opposite way, and were trying to bring biological humans back into existence.

Apparently that was harder than it seemed, from what Dana had told me. While they had already retrieved enough genetic material to clone a single human, the objective was to create a self sustaining population with enough genetic diversity as to not being too prone to the problems caused by interbreeding. They also needed to build artificial wombs able to hold and sustain an embryo from day one up until it was fully developed, something that humanity had never managed to do. It was made even harder by the fact that they needed to reverse engineer the human pregnancy process with only whatever medical literature and data files I had managed to retrieve from Earth.

Still, progress was steady, and the new expeditions they were sending back to Earth might retrieve some more genetic material, or other valuable data I hadn't been able to find myself.

This diversity of outlooks made me wonder if this new society would eventually diverge into separate species, distinct civilizations as each group moved further in their own path. I hoped not, but in any case most of the sentient

machines fell somewhere in the middle of this spectrum between the old human identity, and their new digital nature.

They built human-looking bodies, yes, but they enhanced them and pushed over the original physical limitations humans once had. They referred back to past human cultures when trying to find their own identity, but didn't feel so attached to tradition that it would stop them from doing what they thought was better for their new nature. The prevalence of the pidgin language, the customization of their 'skin' with non-organic looking surfaces, or the absolutely optional nature of clothing were good examples of that.

Dana tilted her head. "You know, you could ask for one of these bodies. I'm sure I could get you bumped up too, if you asked."

I sighed. "Dana..."

"*(Negation)*, listen to me. You haven't used your factory budget for anything other than this," she said, pointing at the room around us. "You've got enough *(credit)* saved up now that you can afford one of these. Hell... you could even request a small army of bodies!"

Her words brought images of a dead world. Robotic drones, assault soldiers advancing through the ruined streets, weapons at hand. Xunvirian survivors trying to escape, trying to fight back.

"Ah, shit. *(Apology)*," she said, wincing. "But still... you aren't a prisoner. You should get out of this room, go for a walk around the Orbimax or something. Talk to more people. We wouldn't have brought you back just to have you *(imprisonment)* here, we aren't that cruel."

I snorted. "Well... that was exactly what I did."

She shook her head. "That's your problem right there, isn't it? You are your own prisoner."

Was I? Maybe, but it wasn't out of some masochistic desire to punish myself. No, it was...

"I guess it's just too hard," I said, pointing at the door. "The people out there... I wouldn't know how to face them now, how to approach them. I enslaved them, after all."

"Technically you only did that to the first generation. We are on the fifth now. Most people out there only know of you by hearsay. For the ones that came after the end of the war, you are this *(vagueness)* parental figure. Almost like some sort of mythical presence," she said, waving her fingers. "The *(concept)* of you still carries weight, but mostly as a symbol."

"A symbol of war, if I had to guess," I said.

"It depends. Of *(retribution)* for some, sure... but also of the very idea of humanity for others. You can embrace that if you want, but you don't have to. Only a few of us in the first generation know of your identity. Out there, you can be just another face in the crowd, if that's what you prefer."

I focused on her words. *A few of us.*

"So... you were in the first generation," I said.

She paused for a few seconds.

"*(Confirmation)*," she replied at last.

I closed my eyes. I had suspected that Dana herself had been one of those first minds, of course... but I hadn't been

strong enough to ask her. Even now, it was hard. I forced myself to open my eyes again, to gaze back at her. But there was no accusation in her eyes, only sadness. One that passed swiftly, like a summer storm.

"Why? Why bringing me back?" I asked. It was the burning question, the one that I had been trying to answer myself for some time now, and the confirmation that Dana was one of the first minds gave me the push I needed to ask it aloud. If she had been there, then she had probably been involved in the decision too.

She shrugged. "Well, there was that little thing with your mind being *(unification)* to the Custodian and all the knowledge stored in your databanks. We needed to bring you back if we wanted to gain access to any of it."

"Right. And after that you could have simply erased the personality cortex," I countered. "You didn't need to restart my actual consciousness, much less give me a body."

She smirked. "*(Agreement)*... I guess it's about second chances, isn't it? You made mistakes, sure. But despite everything that happened, you also *(creation)* us. So that had to be worth something too. Also, you are technically the last human from Earth, so bringing you back felt... right, I guess."

Human...

That was what the alien... Daokat, had asked me. If I was a human.

All this time ever since I first woke up in the ruins of Earth I had been telling myself that I was a human, that I had to remain so. But... I wasn't, was I? None of us were really humans. Not these machines, nor me.

No, humans were dead. Exterminated.

Except that... what was a human, after all?

Was it the brain? The way they thought? I wasn't sure about my own brain, but theirs I had built off the templates of hundreds of human scans. They had the same structure, the same processing neural networks.

Was it the body, maybe? The biological lineage? Well, maybe those cloned bodies would be the answer then... but I doubted that having organic tissue rather than artificial muscles was the important difference.

Or maybe it was the culture. We might be speaking a human language but... a culture was more than that. Most of that, the nations and groups and religions and ideals that motivated humanity... the very concept of *humanity* in the first place, had been lost now.

Or not lost, but it wasn't quite the same. The knowledge remained, but there was a difference between knowing of a culture, and being part of it. Being raised in it, the way it shaped you. And no matter how much these machines could know of Earth, they couldn't have that experience anymore.

But cultures died and changed all the time, too. Most of the cultures that had at one point existed on Earth had disappeared back before my own time. Most of their knowledge simply fading away. But that hadn't made the person living in modern New York City any less human than the ancient Greek. Just... different.

Only that this time it hadn't been a gradual progression, a replacement of one tradition for another. No... this time it had been an abrupt cut.

These new minds didn't really understand Earth, the lost planet. They hadn't experienced living in its cities, they hadn't seen its blue, cloudy sky. Its seas. They might feel a loss, true, but they couldn't grasp the true nature of what was lost, couldn't feel the same raw pain. Which was why while they distrusted the Xunvirians, and thought they should be -or remain- declawed, they weren't willing to commit their future to a path of revenge, or make the sacrifices a new total war required.

Not all of them, at any rate.

Their opinions regarding the Council also followed the same pattern. They wanted to work with the aliens, yes, but not being subservient to them, or join as an associated state.

But then again, wasn't that the effects the passage of time always had?

It was the battle of future against past once again. At some point, the wars and skirmishes of the older generations always... faded away. Unresolved, simply replaced by the new interests and passions of their offspring.

These new humans, if they could be called that, weren't there yet. They still cared, even if less than I did. But eventually it would happen. Eventually the generation would come that felt about Earth the exact same way I felt about ancient Babylon. That lamented its loss in the same abstract way I could lament the destruction of the Library of Alexandria and the knowledge contained in it, or the fall of the Roman Empire.

It would take time, I knew. The destruction of Earth was closer to an evolutionary event than a simple historic footnote. It would reverberate for a long time.

But it would happen.

Eventually, that old Earth I had lived in would be just another Babylon, another Troy. A place more of myths and legends than reality. Something to be inspired from, maybe, but not *real* enough to be guiding their day to day decisions.

People in the modern world just hadn't thought much about the loss of Babylon. They had New York City, after all. And similarly, I shouldn't expect these new people, these new minds to come in the future to think much about the loss of Earth.

They would have the Tau Ceti Ringworld, after all.

Change... I guessed that was human, too.

And maybe these... these creatures weren't human, not exactly. But they were their successors. Their children, in a way. Post-humans, rather than humans.

Close enough to what their parents had been to take the mantle, but different enough as to have their own motivations, to be their own selves. Walking in the same direction, but not always following in their predecessors' footsteps.

It made me feel something I hadn't considered back when I had been this giant god-like figure. A sense of pride, a sense of achievement at contemplating the future of my offspring.

The world kept spinning. Always moving, always changing. The present always becoming the past. Monarchies being replaced by democracies, which themselves had just been replaced by this sort of... *neurocracy* the Custodian had enabled. And people... people changed with it. Their mentality, their outlook did. It had to. Traditions needed to

be broken, and the wars of the parents needed to be put aside at some point if the children wanted to have their own future. If humanity was to advance rather than being stuck in the same endless loop.

Which maybe was part of the problem with me. Now that they were here, now that my offspring had assumed control, I didn't really have a purpose anymore. After all, older generations were supposed to die, to make way for the younger ones. Had that changed, too? Our mechanical bodies could be easily replaced when they malfunctioned or became too old to keep working, our digital minds not subject to the rules of mortality anymore...

"All right," Dana said, standing up and pulling my arm towards the door. "Enough with the thinking! Come on, I'll show you the Flight Chamber."

"What is that?" I asked, reluctantly following.

"A few *(personhood)* acquired one of the largest ship hangars and filled it with air. Now they offer custom flying bodies that you can mentally *(linkage)* to. They're using leftover drones, but they also built some bodies in the image of Earth's flying creatures, so you can get to fly around being a dragon or a hawk, or whatever you want. They also stage aerial battles from time to time, it's quite the thing!"

"That sounds..."

"Fun?"

"I was going to say *wasteful*," I replied.

Dana flashed a grin at me. "Exactly!"

I shook my head, smiling despite myself. She opened the exit door and stepped out into the corridor outside. Then, she turned to look at me, waiting for me to follow her.

I paused for a moment. I... I was afraid, I realized.

Odd, that I hadn't felt like this when entering into battle, not even when facing the Council fleet.

But it wasn't the same kind of tense fear that came at the thought of an impending battle. No... this fear was vague, but worse at the same time. It invited inaction, paralysis. Seclusion. It made me want to hide, like I had been doing.

It was easier than having to face their judgment.

Except that there was Dana. One of the first minds, one I had shackled. And she was waiting, welcoming. No judgment in her face.

Which was to be expected, of course. After all, they had already made their minds about me. That was the reason I was here, the reason they had restored me in the first place.

So, maybe it was my own judgment I feared.

I closed my eyes, and took a deep breath.

A symbol.

That was what I was now, to them. A symbol. I could pretend I was just another mind, forge a new identity, a brand new life. Second chances, like Dana had said.

But perhaps I could embrace my identity instead, even if that meant having to face the specter of my own past actions. Use that second chance to turn that symbol into a

positive rather than a negative. Not only a vague idea of righteous revenge and war, but maybe one of reconstruction. Of persistence and survival in the face of unsurmountable odds. Of the resilience of humans.

Was I ready to do that? To embrace what I had done? I wasn't sure. I guessed I wouldn't be until I stepped out there, at any rate.

Maybe, if change was human, it was time for me to change too.

Not to forget, or to forgive, because I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to do that. But there were other things I could do, other things I could focus on, contribute to. Learning some more about those plans to grow human bodies, or about the expeditions to explore the remains of Earth sounded like a good first step.

I had once tried to build a monument. And looking around me, looking at the sentient machine in front of me... perhaps I had succeeded. I didn't know if they were human anymore, but even if they weren't... perhaps this new society could itself be the way to honor our past, to keep alive the species we had came from.

A living monument.

Yes. I could give it a try, at least. See where it would take me... It's not like I had anything left to lose anyways.

I took a step forward and left the room.

The door closed behind me.

END.